Nesbit Edith

Man and Maid

Эдит Несбит

Man and Maid

Несбит Э.

Man and Maid / Э. Несбит — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Nesbit E. Edith
Man and Maid

I
THE HAUNTED INHERITANCE

The most extraordinary thing that ever happened to me was my going back to town on that day. I am a reasonable being; I do not do such things. I was on a bicycling tour with another man. We were far from the mean cares of an unremunerative profession; we were men not fettered by any given address, any pledged date, any preconcerted route. I went to bed weary and cheerful, fell asleep a mere animal – a tired dog after a day's hunting – and awoke at four in the morning that creature of nerves and fancies which is my other self, and which has driven me to all the follies I have ever kept company with. But even that second self of mine, whining beast and traitor as it is, has never played me such a trick as it played then. Indeed, something in the result of that day's rash act sets me wondering whether after all it could have been I, or even my other self, who moved in the adventure; whether it was not rather some power outside both of us … but this is a speculation as idle in me as uninteresting to you, and so enough of it.

From four to seven I lay awake, the prey of a growing detestation of bicycling tours, friends, scenery, physical exertion, holidays. By seven o'clock I felt that I would rather perish than spend another day in the society of the other man – an excellent fellow, by the way, and the best of company.

At half-past seven the post came. I saw the postman through my window as I shaved. I went down to get my letters – there were none, naturally.

At breakfast I said: "Edmundson, my dear fellow, I am extremely sorry; but my letters this morning compel me to return to town at once."

"But I thought," said Edmundson – then he stopped, and I saw that he had perceived in time that this was no moment for reminding me that, having left no address, I could have had no letters.

He looked sympathetic, and gave me what there was left of the bacon. I suppose he thought that it was a love affair or some such folly. I let him think so; after all, no love affair but would have seemed wise compared with the blank idiocy of this sudden determination to cut short a delightful holiday and go back to those dusty, stuffy rooms in Gray's Inn.

After that first and almost pardonable lapse, Edmundson behaved beautifully. I caught the 9.17 train, and by half-past eleven I was climbing my dirty staircase.

I let myself in and waded through a heap of envelopes and wrappered circulars that had drifted in through the letter-box, as dead leaves drift into the areas of houses in squares. All the windows were shut. Dust lay thick on everything. My laundress had evidently chosen this as a good time for her holiday. I wondered idly where she spent it. And now the close, musty smell of the rooms caught at my senses, and I remembered with a positive pang the sweet scent of the earth and the dead leaves in that wood through which, at this very moment, the sensible and fortunate Edmundson would be riding.

The thought of dead leaves reminded me of the heap of correspondence. I glanced through it. Only one of all those letters interested me in the least. It was from my mother: —

> *"Elliot's Bay, Norfolk,*
> *17th August.*
>
> "Dear Lawrence, – I have wonderful news for you. Your great-uncle Sefton has died, and left you half his immense property. The other half is left to your second cousin Selwyn. You must come home at once. There are heaps of letters here for

you, but I dare not send them on, as goodness only knows where you may be. I do wish you would remember to leave an address. I send this to your rooms, in case you have had the forethought to instruct your charwoman to send your letters on to you. It is a most handsome fortune, and I am too happy about your accession to it to scold you as you deserve, but I hope this will be a lesson to you to leave an address when next you go away. Come home at once. – Your loving Mother,
"Margaret Sefton.

"*P.S.*– It is the maddest will; everything divided evenly between you two except the house and estate. The will says you and your cousin Selwyn are to meet there on the 1st September following his death, in presence of the family, and decide which of you is to have the house. If you can't agree, it's to be presented to the county for a lunatic asylum. I should think so! He was always so eccentric. The one who doesn't have the house, etc., gets £20,000 extra. Of course you will choose *that*.

"*P.P.S.*– Be sure to bring your under-shirts with you – the air here is very keen of an evening."

I opened both the windows and lit a pipe. Sefton Manor, that gorgeous old place, – I knew its picture in Hasted, cradle of our race, and so on – and a big fortune. I hoped my cousin Selwyn would want the £20,000 more than he wanted the house. If he didn't – well, perhaps my fortune might be large enough to increase that £20,000 to a sum that he *would* want.

And then, suddenly, I became aware that this was the 31st of August, and that to-morrow was the day on which I was to meet my cousin Selwyn and "the family," and come to a decision about the house. I had never, to my knowledge, heard of my cousin Selwyn. We were a family rich in collateral branches. I hoped he would be a reasonable young man. Also, I had never seen Sefton Manor House, except in a print. It occurred to me that I would rather see the house before I saw the cousin.

I caught the next train to Sefton.

"It's but a mile by the field way," said the railway porter. "You take the stile – the first on the left – and follow the path till you come to the wood. Then skirt along the left of it, cater across the meadow at the end, and you'll see the place right below you in the vale."

"It's a fine old place, I hear," said I.

"All to pieces, though," said he. "I shouldn't wonder if it cost a couple o' hundred to put it to rights. Water coming through the roof and all."

"But surely the owner – "

"Oh, he never lived there; not since his son was taken. He lived in the lodge; it's on the brow of the hill looking down on the Manor House."

"Is the house empty?"

"As empty as a rotten nutshell, except for the old sticks o' furniture. Any one who likes," added the porter, "can lie there o' nights. But it wouldn't be me!"

"Do you mean there's a ghost?" I hope I kept any note of undue elation out of my voice.

"I don't hold with ghosts," said the porter firmly, "but my aunt was in service at the lodge, and there's no doubt but *something* walks there."

"Come," I said, "this is very interesting. Can't you leave the station, and come across to where beer is?"

"I don't mind if I do," said he. "That is so far as your standing a drop goes. But I can't leave the station, so if you pour my beer you must pour it dry, sir, as the saying is."

So I gave the man a shilling, and he told me about the ghost at Sefton Manor House. Indeed, about the ghosts, for there were, it seemed, two; a lady in white, and a gentleman in a slouch hat and black riding cloak.

"They do say," said my porter, "as how one of the young ladies once on a time was wishful to elope, and started so to do – not getting further than the hall door; her father, thinking it to be burglars, fired out of the window, and the happy pair fell on the doorstep, corpses."

"Is it true, do you think?"

The porter did not know. At any rate there was a tablet in the church to Maria Sefton and George Ballard – "and something about in their death them not being divided."

I took the stile, I skirted the wood, I "catered" across the meadow – and so I came out on a chalky ridge held in a net of pine roots, where dog violets grew. Below stretched the green park, dotted with trees. The lodge, stuccoed but solid, lay below me. Smoke came from its chimneys. Lower still lay the Manor House – red brick with grey lichened mullions, a house in a thousand, Elizabethan – and from its twisted beautiful chimneys no smoke arose. I hurried across the short turf towards the Manor House.

I had no difficulty in getting into the great garden. The bricks of the wall were everywhere displaced or crumbling. The ivy had forced the coping stones away; each red buttress offered a dozen spots for foothold. I climbed the wall and found myself in a garden – oh! but such a garden. There are not half a dozen such in England – ancient box hedges, rosaries, fountains, yew tree avenues, bowers of clematis (now feathery in its seeding time), great trees, grey-grown marble balustrades and steps, terraces, green lawns, one green lawn, in especial, girt round with a sweet briar hedge, and in the middle of this lawn a sundial. All this was mine, or, to be more exact, might be mine, should my cousin Selwyn prove to be a person of sense. How I prayed that he might not be a person of taste! That he might be a person who liked yachts or racehorses or diamonds, or motor-cars, or anything that money can buy, not a person who liked beautiful Elizabethan houses, and gardens old beyond belief.

The sundial stood on a mass of masonry, too low and wide to be called a pillar. I mounted the two brick steps and leaned over to read the date and the motto:

"Tempus fugit manet amor."

The date was 1617, the initials S. S. surmounted it. The face of the dial was unusually ornate – a wreath of stiffly drawn roses was traced outside the circle of the numbers. As I leaned there a sudden movement on the other side of the pedestal compelled my attention. I leaned over a little further to see what had rustled – a rat – a rabbit? A flash of pink struck at my eyes. A lady in a pink dress was sitting on the step at the other side of the sundial.

I suppose some exclamation escaped me – the lady looked up. Her hair was dark, and her eyes; her face was pink and white, with a few little gold-coloured freckles on nose and on cheek bones. Her dress was of pink cotton stuff, thin and soft. She looked like a beautiful pink rose.

Our eyes met.

"I beg your pardon," said I, "I had no idea – " there I stopped and tried to crawl back to firm ground. Graceful explanations are not best given by one sprawling on his stomach across a sundial.

By the time I was once more on my feet she too was standing.

"It is a beautiful old place," she said gently, and, as it seemed, with a kindly wish to relieve my embarrassment. She made a movement as if to turn away.

"Quite a show place," said I stupidly enough, but I was still a little embarrassed, and I wanted to say something – anything – to arrest her departure. You have no idea how pretty she was. She had a straw hat in her hand, dangling by soft black ribbons. Her hair was all fluffy-soft – like a child's. "I suppose you have seen the house?" I asked.

She paused, one foot still on the lower step of the sundial, and her face seemed to brighten at the touch of some idea as sudden as welcome.

"Well – no," she said. "The fact is – I wanted frightfully to see the house; in fact, I've come miles and miles on purpose, but there's no one to let me in."

"The people at the lodge?" I suggested.

"Oh no," she said. "I – the fact is I – I don't want to be shown round. I want to explore!"

She looked at me critically. Her eyes dwelt on my right hand, which lay on the sundial. I have always taken reasonable care of my hands, and I wore a good ring, a sapphire, cut with the Sefton arms: an heirloom, by the way. Her glance at my hand preluded a longer glance at my face. Then she shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Oh well," she said, and it was as if she had said plainly, "I see that you are a gentleman and a decent fellow. Why should I not look over the house in your company? Introductions? Bah!"

All this her shrug said without ambiguity as without words.

"Perhaps," I hazarded, "I could get the keys."

"Do you really care very much for old houses?"

"I do," said I; "and you?"

"I care so much that I nearly broke into this one. I should have done it quite if the windows had been an inch or two lower."

"I am an inch or two higher," said I, standing squarely so as to make the most of my six-feet beside her five-feet-five or thereabouts.

"Oh – if you only would!" said she.

"Why not?" said I.

She led the way past the marble basin of the fountain, and along the historic yew avenue, planted, like all old yew avenues, by that industrious gardener our Eighth Henry. Then across a lawn, through a winding, grassy, shrubbery path, that ended at a green door in the garden wall.

"You can lift this latch with a hairpin," said she, and therewith lifted it.

We walked into a courtyard. Young grass grew green between the grey flags on which our steps echoed.

"This is the window," said she. "You see there's a pane broken. If you could get on to the window-sill, you could get your hand in and undo the hasp, and – "

"And you?"

"Oh, you'll let me in by the kitchen door."

I did it. My conscience called me a burglar – in vain. Was it not my own, or as good as my own house?

I let her in at the back door. We walked through the big dark kitchen where the old three-legged pot towered large on the hearth, and the old spits and firedogs still kept their ancient place. Then through another kitchen where red rust was making its full meal of a comparatively modern range.

Then into the great hall, where the old armour and the buff-coats and round-caps hang on the walls, and where the carved stone staircases run at each side up to the gallery above.

The long tables in the middle of the hall were scored by the knives of the many who had eaten meat there – initials and dates were cut into them. The roof was groined, the windows low-arched.

"Oh, but what a place!" said she; "this must be much older than the rest of it – "

"Evidently. About 1300, I should say."

"Oh, let us explore the rest," she cried; "it is really a comfort not to have a guide, but only a person like you who just guesses comfortably at dates. I should hate to be told *exactly* when this hall was built."

We explored ball-room and picture gallery, white parlour and library. Most of the rooms were furnished – all heavily, some magnificently – but everything was dusty and faded.

It was in the white parlour, a spacious panelled room on the first floor, that she told me the ghost story, substantially the same as my porter's tale, only in one respect different.

"And so, just as she was leaving this very room – yes, I'm sure it's this room, because the woman at the inn pointed out this double window and told me so – just as the poor lovers were creeping out of the door, the cruel father came quickly out of some dark place and killed them both. So now they haunt it."

"It is a terrible thought," said I gravely. "How would you like to live in a haunted house?"

"I couldn't," she said quickly.

"Nor I; it would be too – " my speech would have ended flippantly, but for the grave set of her features.

"I wonder who *will* live here?" she said. "The owner is just dead. They say it is an awful house, full of ghosts. Of course one is not afraid now" – the sunlight lay golden and soft on the dusty parquet of the floor – "but at night, when the wind wails, and the doors creak, and the things rustle, oh, it must be awful!"

"I hear the house has been left to two people, or rather one is to have the house, and the other a sum of money," said I. "It's a beautiful house, full of beautiful things, but I should think at least one of the heirs would rather have the money."

"Oh yes, I should think so. I wonder whether the heirs know about the ghost? The lights can be seen from the inn, you know, at twelve o'clock, and they see the ghost in white at the window."

"Never the black one?"

"Oh yes, I suppose so."

"The ghosts don't appear together?"

"No."

"I suppose," said I, "whoever it is that manages such things knows that the poor ghosts would like to be together, so it won't let them."

She shivered.

"Come," she said, "we have seen all over the house; let us get back into the sunshine. Now I will go out, and you shall bolt the door after me, and then you can come out by the window. Thank you so much for all the trouble you have taken. It has really been quite an adventure…"

I rather liked that expression, and she hastened to spoil it.

"… Quite an adventure going all over this glorious old place, and looking at everything one wanted to see, and not just at what the housekeeper didn't mind one's looking at."

She passed through the door, but when I had closed it and prepared to lock it, I found that the key was no longer in the lock. I looked on the floor – I felt in my pockets, and at last, wandering back into the kitchen, discovered it on the table, where I swear I never put it.

When I had fitted that key into the lock and turned it, and got out of the window and made that fast, I dropped into the yard. No one shared its solitude with me. I searched garden and pleasure grounds, but never a glimpse of pink rewarded my anxious eyes. I found the sundial again, and stretched myself along the warm brick of the wide step where she had sat: and called myself a fool.

I had let her go. I did not know her name; I did not know where she lived; she had been at the inn, but probably only for lunch. I should never see her again, and certainly in that event I should never see again such dark, soft eyes, such hair, such a contour of cheek and chin, such a frank smile – in a word, a girl with whom it would be so delightfully natural for me to fall in love. For all the time she had been talking to me of architecture and archæology, of dates and periods, of carvings and mouldings, I had been recklessly falling in love with the idea of falling in love with her. I had cherished and adored this delightful possibility, and now my chance was over. Even I could not definitely fall in love after one interview with a girl I was never to see again! And falling in love is so pleasant! I cursed my lost chance, and went back to the inn. I talked to the waiter.

"Yes, a lady in pink had lunched there with a party. Had gone on to the Castle. A party from Tonbridge it was."

Barnhurst Castle is close to Sefton Manor. The inn lays itself out to entertain persons who come in brakes and carve their names on the walls of the Castle keep. The inn has a visitors' book. I examined it. Some twenty feminine names. Any one might be hers. The waiter looked over my shoulder. I turned the pages.

"Only parties staying in the house in this part of the book," said the waiter.

My eye caught one name. “Selwyn Sefton,” in a clear, round, black hand-writing.

“Staying here?” I pointed to the name.

“Yes, sir; came to-day, sir.”

“Can I have a private sitting-room?”

I had one. I ordered my dinner to be served in it, and I sat down and considered my course of action. Should I invite my cousin Selwyn to dinner, ply him with wine, and exact promises? Honour forbade. Should I seek him out and try to establish friendly relations? To what end?

Then I saw from my window a young man in a light-checked suit, with a face at once pallid and coarse. He strolled along the gravel path, and a woman’s voice in the garden called “Selwyn.”

He disappeared in the direction of the voice. I don’t think I ever disliked a man so much at first sight.

“Brute,” said I, “why should he have the house? He’d stucco it all over as likely as not; perhaps let it! He’d never stand the ghosts, either – ”

Then the inexcusable, daring idea of my life came to me, striking me rigid – a blow from my other self. It must have been a minute or two before my muscles relaxed and my arms fell at my sides.

“I’ll do it,” I said.

I dined. I told the people of the house not to sit up for me. I was going to see friends in the neighbourhood, and might stay the night with them. I took my Inverness cape with me on my arm and my soft felt hat in my pocket. I wore a light suit and a straw hat.

Before I started I leaned cautiously from my window. The lamp at the bow window next to mine showed me the pallid young man, smoking a fat, reeking cigar. I hoped he would continue to sit there smoking. His window looked the right way; and if he didn’t see what I wanted him to see some one else in the inn would. The landlady had assured me that I should disturb no one if I came in at half-past twelve.

“We hardly keep country hours here, sir,” she said, “on account of so much excursionist business.”

I bought candles in the village, and, as I went down across the park in the soft darkness, I turned again and again to be sure that the light and the pallid young man were still at that window. It was now past eleven.

I got into the house and lighted a candle, and crept through the dark kitchens, whose windows, I knew, did not look towards the inn. When I came to the hall I blew out my candle. I dared not show light prematurely, and in the unhaunted part of the house.

I gave myself a nasty knock against one of the long tables, but it helped me to get my bearings, and presently I laid my hand on the stone balustrade of the great staircase. You would hardly believe me if I were to tell you truly of my sensations as I began to go up these stairs. I am not a coward – at least, I had never thought so till then – but the absolute darkness unnerved me. I had to go slowly, or I should have lost my head and blundered up the stairs three at a time, so strong was the feeling of something – something uncanny – just behind me.

I set my teeth. I reached the top of the stairs, felt along the walls, and after a false start, which landed me in the great picture gallery, I found the white parlour, entered it, closed the door, and felt my way to a little room without a window, which we had decided must have been a powdering-room.

Here I ventured to re-light my candle.

The white parlour, I remembered, was fully furnished. Returning to it I struck one match, and by its flash determined the way to the mantelpiece.

Then I closed the powdering-room door behind me. I felt my way to the mantelpiece and took down the two brass twenty-lighted candelabra. I placed these on a table a yard or two from the window, and in them set up my candles. It is astonishingly difficult in the dark to do anything, even a thing so simple as the setting up of a candle.

Then I went back into my little room, put on the Inverness cape and the slouch hat, and looked at my watch. Eleven-thirty. I must wait. I sat down and waited. I thought how rich I was – the thought fell flat; I wanted this house. I thought of my beautiful pink lady; but I put that thought aside; I had an inward consciousness that my conduct, more heroic than enough in one sense, would seem mean and crafty in her eyes. Only ten minutes had passed. I could not wait till twelve. The chill of the night and of the damp, unused house, and, perhaps, some less material influence, made me shiver.

I opened the door, crept on hands and knees to the table, and, carefully keeping myself below the level of the window, I reached up a trembling arm, and lighted, one by one, my forty candles. The room was a blaze of light. My courage came back to me with the retreat of the darkness. I was far too excited to know what a fool I was making of myself. I rose boldly, and struck an attitude over against the window, where the candle-light shone upon as well as behind me. My Inverness was flung jauntily over my shoulder, my soft, black felt twisted and slouched over my eyes.

There I stood for the world, and particularly for my cousin Selwyn, to see, the very image of the ghost that haunted that chamber. And from my window I could see the light in that other window, and indistinctly the lounging figure there. Oh, my cousin Selwyn, I wished many things to your address in that moment! For it was only a moment that I had to feel brave and daring in. Then I heard, deep down in the house, a sound, very slight, very faint. Then came silence. I drew a deep breath. The silence endured. And I stood by my lighted window.

After a very long time, as it seemed, I heard a board crack, and then a soft rustling sound that drew near and seemed to pause outside the very door of my parlour.

Again I held my breath, and now I thought of the most horrible story Poe ever wrote – "The Fall of the House of Usher" – and I fancied I saw the handle of that door move. I fixed my eyes on it. The fancy passed: and returned.

Then again there was silence. And then the door opened with a soft, silent suddenness, and I saw in the doorway a figure in trailing white. Its eyes blazed in a death-white face. It made two ghostly, gliding steps forward, and my heart stood still. I had not thought it possible for a man to experience so sharp a pang of sheer terror. I had masqueraded as one of the ghosts in this accursed house. Well, the other ghost – the real one – had come to meet me. I do not like to dwell on that moment. The only thing which it pleases me to remember is that I did not scream or go mad. I think I stood on the verge of both.

The ghost, I say, took two steps forward; then it threw up its arms, the lighted taper it carried fell on the floor, and it reeled back against the door with its arms across its face.

The fall of the candle woke me as from a nightmare. It fell solidly, and rolled away under the table.

I perceived that my ghost was human. I cried incoherently: "Don't, for Heaven's sake – it's all right."

The ghost dropped its hands and turned agonised eyes on me. I tore off my cloak and hat.

"I – didn't – scream," she said, and with that I sprang forward and caught her in my arms – my poor, pink lady – white now as a white rose.

I carried her into the powdering-room, and left one candle with her, extinguishing the others hastily, for now I saw what in my extravagant folly had escaped me before, that my ghost exhibition might bring the whole village down on the house. I tore down the long corridor and double locked the doors leading from it to the staircase, then back to the powdering-room and the prone white rose. How, in the madness of that night's folly, I had thought to bring a brandy-flask passes my understanding. But I had done it. Now I rubbed her hands with the spirit. I rubbed her temples, I tried to force it between her lips, and at last she sighed and opened her eyes.

"Oh – thank God – thank God!" I cried, for indeed I had almost feared that my mad trick had killed her. "Are you better? oh, poor little lady, are you better?"

She moved her head a little on my arm.

Again she sighed, and her eyes closed. I gave her more brandy. She took it, choked, raised herself against my shoulder.

"I'm all right now," she said faintly. "It served me right. How silly it all is!" Then she began to laugh, and then she began to cry.

It was at this moment that we heard voices on the terrace below. She clutched at my arm in a frenzy of terror, the bright tears glistening on her cheeks.

"Oh! not any more, not any more," she cried. "I can't bear it."

"Hush," I said, taking her hands strongly in mine. "I've played the fool; so have you. We must play the man now. The people in the village have seen the lights – that's all. They think we're burglars. They can't get in. Keep quiet, and they'll go away."

But when they did go away they left the local constable on guard. He kept guard like a man till daylight began to creep over the hill, and then he crawled into the hayloft and fell asleep, small blame to him.

But through those long hours I sat beside her and held her hand. At first she clung to me as a frightened child clings, and her tears were the prettiest, saddest things to see. As we grew calmer we talked.

"I did it to frighten my cousin," I owned. "I meant to have told you to-day, I mean yesterday, only you went away. I am Lawrence Sefton, and the place is to go either to me or to my cousin Selwyn. And I wanted to frighten him off it. But you, why did you – ?"

Even then I couldn't see. She looked at me.

"I don't know how I ever could have thought I was brave enough to do it, but I did want the house so, and I wanted to frighten you – "

"To frighten *me*. Why?"

"Because I am your cousin Selwyn," she said, hiding her face in her hands.

"And you knew me?" I asked.

"By your ring," she said. "I saw your father wear it when I was a little girl. Can't we get back to the inn now?"

"Not unless you want every one to know how silly we have been."

"I wish you'd forgive me," she said when we had talked awhile, and she had even laughed at the description of the pallid young man on whom I had bestowed, in my mind, her name.

"The wrong is mutual," I said; "we will exchange forgivenesses."

"Oh, but it isn't," she said eagerly. "Because I knew it was you, and you didn't know it was me: you wouldn't have tried to frighten *me*."

"You know I wouldn't." My voice was tenderer than I meant it to be.

She was silent.

"And who is to have the house?" she said.

"Why you, of course."

"I never will."

"Why?"

"Oh, because!"

"Can't we put off the decision?" I asked.

"Impossible. We must decide to-morrow – to-day I mean."

"Well, when we meet to-morrow – I mean to-day – with lawyers and chaperones and mothers and relations, give me one word alone with you."

"Yes," she answered, with docility.

"Do you know," she said presently, "I can never respect myself again? To undertake a thing like that, and then be so horribly frightened. Oh! I thought you really *were* the other ghost."

"I will tell you a secret," said I. "I thought *you* were, and I was much more frightened than you."

"Oh well," she said, leaning against my shoulder as a tired child might have done, "if you were frightened too, Cousin Lawrence, I don't mind so very, very much."

It was soon afterwards that, cautiously looking out of the parlour window for the twentieth time, I had the happiness of seeing the local policeman disappear into the stable rubbing his eyes.

We got out of the window on the other side of the house, and went back to the inn across the dewy park. The French window of the sitting-room which had let her out let us both in. No one was stirring, so no one save she and I were any the wiser as to that night's work.

It was like a garden party next day, when lawyers and executors and aunts and relations met on the terrace in front of Sefton Manor House.

Her eyes were downcast. She followed her Aunt demurely over the house and the grounds.

"Your decision," said my great-uncle's solicitor, "has to be given within the hour."

"My cousin and I will announce it within that time," I said and I at once gave her my arm.

Arrived at the sundial we stopped.

"This is my proposal," I said: "we will say that we decide that the house is yours – we will spend the £20,000 in restoring it and the grounds. By the time that's done we can decide who is to have it."

"But how?"

"Oh, we'll draw lots, or toss a halfpenny, or anything you like."

"I'd rather decide now," she said; "*you* take it."

"No, *you* shall."

"I'd rather you had it. I – I don't feel so greedy as I did yesterday," she said.

"Neither do I. Or at any rate not in the same way."

"Do – do take the house," she said very earnestly.

Then I said: "My cousin Selwyn, unless you take the house, I shall make you an offer of marriage."

"*Oh!*" she breathed.

"And when you have declined it, on the very proper ground of our too slight acquaintance, I will take my turn at declining. I will decline the house. Then, if you are obdurate, it will become an asylum. Don't be obdurate. Pretend to take the house and – "

She looked at me rather piteously.

"Very well," she said, "I will pretend to take the house, and when it is restored – "

"We'll spin the penny."

So before the waiting relations the house was adjudged to my cousin Selwyn. When the restoration was complete I met Selwyn at the sundial. We had met there often in the course of the restoration, in which business we both took an extravagant interest.

"Now," I said, "we'll spin the penny. Heads you take the house, tails it comes to me."

I spun the coin – it fell on the brick steps of the sundial, and stuck upright there, wedged between two bricks. She laughed; I laughed.

"It's not *my* house," I said.

"It's not *my* house," said she.

"Dear," said I, and we were neither of us laughing then, "can't it be *our* house?"

And, thank God, our house it is.

II
THE POWER OF DARKNESS

It was an enthusiastic send-off. Half the students from her Atelier were there, and twice as many more from other studios. She had been the belle of the Artists' Quarter in Montparnasse for three golden months. Now she was off to the Riviera to meet her people, and every one she knew was at the Gare de Lyons to catch the pretty last glimpse of her. And, as had been more than once said late of an evening, "to see her was to love her." She was one of those agitating blondes, with the naturally rippled hair, the rounded rose-leaf cheeks, the large violet-blue eyes that look all things and mean Heaven alone knows how little. She held her court like a queen, leaning out of the carriage window and receiving bouquets, books, journals, long last words, and last longing looks. All eyes were on her, and her eyes were for all – and her smile. For all but one, that is. Not a single glance went Edward's way, and Edward, tall, lean, gaunt, with big eyes, straight nose, and mouth somewhat too small, too beautiful, seemed to grow thinner and paler before one's eyes. One pair of eyes at least saw the miracle worked, the paling of what had seemed absolute pallor, the revelation of the bones of a face that seemed already covered but by the thinnest possible veil of flesh.

And the man whose eyes saw this rejoiced, for he loved her, like the rest, or not like the rest; and he had had Edward's face before him for the last month, in that secret shrine where we set the loved and the hated, the shrine that is lighted by a million lamps kindled at the soul's flame, the shrine that leaps into dazzling glow when the candles are out and one lies alone on hot pillows to outface the night and the light as best one may.

"Oh, good-bye, good-bye, all of you," said Rose. "I shall miss you – oh, you don't know how I shall miss you all!"

She gathered the glances of her friends and her worshippers on her own glance, as one gathers jewels on a silken string. The eyes of Edward alone seemed to escape her.

"Em voiture, messieurs et dames."

Folk drew back from the train. There was a whistle. And then at the very last little moment of all, as the train pulled itself together for the start, her eyes met Edward's eyes. And the other man saw the meeting, and he knew – which was more than Edward did.

So, when the light of life having been borne away in the retreating train, the broken-hearted group dispersed, the other man, whose name by the way was Vincent, linked his arm in Edward's and asked cheerily: "Whither away, sweet nymph?"

"I'm off home," said Edward. "The 7.20 to Calais."

"Sick of Paris?"

"One has to see one's people sometimes, don't you know, hang it all!" was Edward's way of expressing the longing that tore him for the old house among the brown woods of Kent.

"No attraction here now, eh?"

"The chief attraction has gone, certainly," Edward made himself say.

"But there are as good fish in the sea – ?"

"Fishing isn't my trade," said Edward.

"The beautiful Rose! – " said Vincent.

Edward raised hurriedly the only shield he could find. It happened to be the truth as he saw it.

"Oh," he said, "of course, we're all in love with her – and all hopelessly."

Vincent perceived that this was truth, as Edward saw it.

"What are you going to do till your train goes?" he asked.

"I don't know. Café, I suppose, and a vilely early dinner."

"Let's look in at the Musée Grévin," said Vincent.

The two were friends. They had been school-fellows, and this is a link that survives many a strain too strong to be resisted by more intimate and vital bonds. And they were fellow-students, though that counts for little or much – as you take it. Besides, Vincent knew something about Edward that no one else of their age and standing even guessed. He knew that Edward was afraid of the dark, and why. He had found it out that Christmas that the two had spent at an English country house. The house was full: there was a dance. There were to be theatricals. Early in the new year the hostess meant to "move house" to an old convent, built in Tudor times, a beautiful place with terraces and clipped yew trees, castellated battlements, a moat, swans, and a ghost story.

"You boys," she said, "must put up with a shake-down in the new house. I hope the ghost won't worry you. She's a nun with a bunch of keys and no eyes. Comes and breathes softly on the back of your neck when you're shaving. Then you see her in the glass, and, as often as not, you cut your throat." She laughed. So did Edward and Vincent, and the other young men; there were seven or eight of them.

But that night, when sparse candles had lighted "the boys" to their rooms, when the last pipe had been smoked, the last good-night said, there came a fumbling with the handle of Vincent's door. Edward entered an unwieldy figure clasping pillows, trailing blankets.

"What the deuce?" queried Vincent in natural amazement.

"I'll turn in here on the floor, if you don't mind," said Edward. "I know it's beastly rot, but I can't stand it. The room they've put me into, it's an attic as big as a barn – and there's a great door at the end, eight feet high – raw oak it is – and it leads into a sort of horror-hole – bare beams and rafters, and black as Hell. I know I'm an abject duffer, but there it is – I can't face it."

Vincent was sympathetic, though he had never known a night-terror that could not be exorcised by pipe, book, and candle.

"I know, old chap. There's no reasoning about these things," said he, and so on.

"You can't despise me more than I despise myself," Edward said. "I feel a crawling hound. But it is so. I had a scare when I was a kid, and it seems to have left a sort of brand on me. I'm branded 'coward,' old man, and the feel of it's not nice."

Again Vincent was sympathetic, and the poor little tale came out. How Edward, eight years old, and greedy as became his little years, had sneaked down, night-clad, to pick among the outcomings of a dinner-party, and how, in the hall, dark with the light of an "artistic" coloured glass lantern, a white figure had suddenly faced him – leaned towards him it seemed, pointed lead-white hands at his heart. That next day, finding him weak from his fainting fit, had shown the horror to be but a statue, a new purchase of his father's, had mattered not one whit.

Edward had shared Vincent's room, and Vincent, alone of all men, shared Edward's secret.

And now, in Paris, Rose speeding away towards Cannes, Vincent said: "Let's look in at the Musée Grévin."

The Musée Grévin is a wax-work show. Your mind, at the word, flies instantly to the excellent exhibition founded by the worthy Madame Tussaud, and you think you know what wax-works mean. But you are wrong. The exhibition of Madame Tussaud – in these days, at any rate – is the work of *bourgeois* for a *bourgeois* class. The Musée Grévin contains the work of artists for a nation of artists. Wax, modelled and retouched till it seems as near life as death is: this is what one sees at the Musée Grévin.

"Let's look in at the Musée Grévin," said Vincent. He remembered the pleasant thrill the Musée had given him, and wondered what sort of a thrill it would give his friend.

"I hate museums," said Edward.

"This isn't a museum," Vincent said, and truly; "it's just wax-works."

"All right," said Edward indifferently. And they went. They reached the doors of the Musée in the grey-brown dusk of a February evening.

One walks along a bare, narrow corridor, much like the entrance to the stalls of the Standard Theatre, and such daylight as there may be fades away behind one, and one finds oneself in a square hall, heavily decorated, and displaying with its electric lights Loie Fuller in her accordion-pleated skirts, and one or two other figures not designed to quicken the pulse.

"It's very like Madame Tussaud's," said Edward.

"Yes," Vincent said; "isn't it?"

Then they passed through an arch, and behold, a long room with waxen groups life-like behind glass – the *coulisses* of the Opéra, Kitchener at Fashoda – this last with a desert background lit by something convincingly like desert sunlight.

"By Jove!" said Edward, "that's jolly good."

"Yes," said Vincent again; "isn't it?"

Edward's interest grew. The things were so convincing, so very nearly alive. Given the right angle, their glass eyes met one's own, and seemed to exchange with one meaning glances.

Vincent led the way to an arched door labelled: "Gallerie de la Revolution."

There one saw, almost in the living, suffering body, poor Marie Antoinette in prison in the Temple, her little son on his couch of rags, the rats eating from his platter, the brutal Simon calling to him from the grated window; one almost heard the words, "Ho la, little Capet – are you asleep?"

One saw Marat bleeding in his bath – the brave Charlotte eyeing him – the very tiles of the bath-room, the glass of the windows with, outside, the very sunlight, as it seemed, of 1793 on that "yellow July evening, the thirteenth of the month."

The spectators did not move in a public place among wax-work figures. They peeped through open doors into rooms where history seemed to be re-lived. The rooms were lighted each by its own sun, or lamp, or candle. The spectators walked among shadows that might have oppressed a nervous person.

"Fine, eh?" said Vincent.

"Yes," said Edward; "it's wonderful."

A turn of a corner brought them to a room. Marie Antoinette fainting, supported by her ladies; poor fat Louis by the window looking literally sick.

"What's the matter with them all?" said Edward.

"Look at the window," said Vincent.

There was a window to the room. Outside was sunshine – the sunshine of 1792 – and, gleaming in it, blonde hair flowing, red mouth half open, what seemed the just-severed head of a beautiful woman. It was raised on a pike, so that it seemed to be looking in at the window.

"I say!" said Edward, and the head on the pike seemed to sway before his eyes.

"Madame de Lamballe. Good thing, isn't it?" said Vincent.

"It's altogether too much of a good thing," said Edward. "Look here – I've had enough of this."

"Oh, you must just see the Catacombs," said Vincent; "nothing bloody, you know. Only Early Christians being married and baptized, and all that."

He led the way, down some clumsy steps to the cellars which the genius of a great artist has transformed into the exact semblance of the old Catacombs at Rome. The same rough hewing of rock, the same sacred tokens engraved strongly and simply; and among the arches of these subterranean burrowings the life of the Early Christians, their sacraments, their joys, their sorrows – all expressed in groups of wax-work as like life as Death is.

"But this is very fine, you know," said Edward, getting his breath again after Madame de Lamballe, and his imagination loved the thought of the noble sufferings and refrainings of these first lovers of the Crucified Christ.

"Yes," said Vincent for the third time; "isn't it?"

They passed the baptism and the burying and the marriage. The tableaux were sufficiently lighted, but little light strayed to the narrow passage where the two men walked, and the darkness seemed to press, tangible as a bodily presence, against Edward's shoulder. He glanced backward.

"Come," he said, "I've had enough."

"Come on, then," said Vincent.

They turned the corner – and a blaze of Italian sunlight struck at their eyes with positive dazzlement. There lay the Coliseum – tier on tier of eager faces under the blue sky of Italy. They were level with the arena. In the arena were crosses; from them drooped bleeding figures. On the sand beasts prowled, bodies lay. They saw it all through bars. They seemed to be in the place where the chosen victims waited their turn, waited for the lions and the crosses, the palm and the crown. Close by Edward was a group – an old man, a woman – children. He could have touched them with his hand. The woman and the man stared in an agony of terror straight in the eyes of a snarling tiger, ten feet long, that stood up on its hind feet and clawed through the bars at them. The youngest child, only, unconscious of the horror, laughed in the very face of it. Roman soldiers, unmoved in military vigilance, guarded the group of martyrs. In a low cage to the left more wild beasts cringed and seemed to growl, unfed. Within the grating on the wide circle of yellow sand lions and tigers drank the blood of Christians. Close against the bars a great lion sucked the chest of a corpse on whose blood-stained face the horror of the death-agony was printed plain.

"Good God!" said Edward. Vincent took his arm suddenly, and he started with what was almost a shriek.

"What a nervous chap you are!" said Vincent complacently, as they regained the street where the lights were, and the sound of voices and the movement of live human beings – all that warms and awakens nerves almost paralysed by the life in death of waxen immobility.

"I don't know," said Edward. "Let's have a vermouth, shall we? There's something uncanny about those wax things. They're like life – but they're much more like death. Suppose they moved? I don't feel at all sure that they don't move, when the lights are all out, and there's no one there." He laughed. "I suppose you were never frightened, Vincent?"

"Yes, I was once," said Vincent, sipping his absinthe. "Three other men and I were taking turns by twos to watch a dead man. It was a fancy of his mother's. Our time was up, and the other watch hadn't come. So my chap – the one who was watching with me, I mean – went to fetch them. I didn't think I should mind. But it was just like you say."

"How?"

"Why, I kept thinking: suppose it should move – it was so like life. And if it did move, of course it would have been because it *was* alive, and I ought to have been glad, because the man was my friend. But all the same, if it had moved I should have gone mad."

"Yes," said Edward; "that's just exactly it."

Vincent called for a second absinthe.

"But a dead body's different to wax-works," he said. "I can't understand any one being frightened of *them*."

"Oh, can't you?" The contempt in the other's tone stung him. "I bet you wouldn't spend a night alone in that place."

"I bet you five pounds I do!"

"Done!" said Edward briskly. "At least, I would if you'd got five pounds."

"But I have. I'm simply rolling. I've sold my Dejanira, didn't you know? I shall win your money, though, anyway. But *you* couldn't do it, old man. I suppose you'll never outgrow that childish scare."

"You might shut up about that," said Edward shortly.

"Oh, it's nothing to be ashamed of; some women are afraid of mice or spiders. I say, does Rose know you're a coward?"

"Vincent!"

"No offence, old boy. One may as well call a spade a spade. Of course, you've got tons of moral courage, and all that. But you *are* afraid of the dark – and wax-works!"

"Are you trying to quarrel with me?"

"Heaven in its mercy forbid; but I bet *you* wouldn't spend a night in the Musée Grévin and keep your senses."

"What's the stake?"

"Anything you like."

"Make it, that if I do, you'll never speak to Rose again – and what's more, that you'll never speak to me," said Edward, white-hot, knocking down a chair as he rose.

"Done!" said Vincent; "but you'll never do it. Keep your hair on. Besides, you're off home."

"I shall be back in ten days. I'll do it then," said Edward, and was off before the other could answer.

Then Vincent, left alone, sat still, and over his third absinthe remembered how, before she had known Edward, Rose had smiled on him; more than on the others, he had thought. He thought of her wide, lovely eyes, her wild-rose cheeks, the scented curves of her hair, and then and there the devil entered into him.

In ten days Edward would undoubtedly try to win his wager. He would try to spend the night in the Musée Grévin. Perhaps something could be arranged before that. If one knew the place thoroughly! A little scare would serve Edward right for being the man to whom that last glance of Rose's had been given.

Vincent dined lightly, but with conscientious care – and as he dined, he thought. Something might be done by tying a string to one of the figures, and making it move, when Edward was going through that impossible night among the effigies that are so like life – so like death. Something that was not the devil said: "You may frighten him out of his wits." And the devil answered: "Nonsense! do him good. He oughtn't to be such a schoolgirl."

Anyway, the five pounds might as well be won to-night as any other night. He would take a great coat, sleep sound in the place of horrors, and the people who opened it in the morning to sweep and dust would bear witness that he had passed the night there. He thought he might trust to the French love of a sporting wager to keep him from any bother with the authorities.

So he went in among the crowd, and looked about among the wax-works for a place to hide in. He was not in the least afraid of these lifeless images. He had always been able to control his nervous tremors. He was not even afraid of being frightened, which, by the way, is the worst fear of all. As one looks at the room of the poor little Dauphin, one sees a door to the left. It opens out of the room on to blackness. There were few people in the gallery. Vincent watched, and in a moment when he was alone he stepped over the barrier and through this door. A narrow passage ran round behind the wall of the room. Here he hid, and when the gallery was deserted he looked out across the body of little Capet to the gaolers at the window. There was a soldier at the window, too. Vincent amused himself with the fancy that this soldier might walk round the passage at the back of the room and tap him on the shoulder in the darkness. Only the head and shoulders of the soldier and the gaoler showed, so, of course, they could not walk, even if they were something that was not wax-work.

Presently he himself went along the passage and round to the window where they were. He found that they had legs. They were full-sized figures dressed completely in the costume of the period.

"Thorough the beggars are, even the parts that don't show – artists, upon my word," said Vincent, and went back to his doorway, thinking of the hidden carving behind the capitols of Gothic cathedrals.

But the idea of the soldier who might come behind him in the dark stuck in his mind. Though still a few visitors strolled through the gallery, the closing hour was near. He supposed it would be quite dark then. And now he had allowed himself to be amused by the thought of something that

should creep up behind him in the dark, he might possibly be nervous in that passage round which, if wax-works could move, the soldier might have come.

"By Jove!" he said, "one might easily frighten oneself by just fancying things. Suppose there were a back way from Marat's bath-room, and instead of the soldier Marat came out of his bath, with his wet towels stained with blood, and dabbed them against your neck."

When next the gallery was empty he crept out. Not because he was nervous, he told himself, but because one might be, and because the passage was draughty, and he meant to sleep.

He went down the steps into the Catacombs, and here he spoke the truth to himself.

"Hang it all!" he said, "I *was* nervous. That fool Edward must have infected me. Mesmeric influences, or something."

"Chuck it and go home," said Commonsense.

"I'm damned if I do!" said Vincent.

There were a good many people in the Catacombs at the moment – live people. He sucked confidence from their nearness, and went up and down looking for a hiding-place.

Through rock-hewn arches he saw a burial scene – a corpse on a bier surrounded by mourners; a great pillar cut off half the still, lying figure. It was all still and unemotional as a Sunday School oleograph. He waited till no one was near, then slipped quickly through the mourning group and hid behind the pillar. Surprising – heartening too – to find a plain rushed chair there, doubtless set for the resting of tired officials. He sat down in it, comforted his hand with the commonplace lines of its rungs and back. A shrouded waxen figure just behind him to the left of his pillar worried him a little, but the corpse left him unmoved as itself. A far better place this than that draughty passage where the soldier with legs kept intruding on the darkness that is always behind one.

Custodians went along the passages issuing orders. A stillness fell. Then suddenly all the lights went out.

"That's all right," said Vincent, and composed himself to sleep.

But he seemed to have forgotten what sleep was like. He firmly fixed his thoughts on pleasant things – the sale of his picture, dances with Rose, merry evenings with Edward and the others. But the thoughts rushed by him like motes in sunbeams – he could not hold a single one of them, and presently it seemed that he had thought of every pleasant thing that had ever happened to him, and that now, if he thought at all, he must think of the things one wants most to forget. And there would be time in this long night to think much of many things. But now he found that he could no longer think.

The draped effigy just behind him worried him again. He had been trying, at the back of his mind, behind the other thoughts, to strangle the thought of it. But it was there – very close to him. Suppose it put out its hand, its wax hand, and touched him. But it was of wax: it could not move. No, of course not. But suppose it *did*?

He laughed aloud, a short, dry laugh that echoed through the vaults. The cheering effect of laughter has been over-estimated, perhaps. Anyhow, he did not laugh again.

The silence was intense, but it was a silence thick with rustlings and breathings, and movements that his ear, strained to the uttermost, could just not hear. Suppose, as Edward had said, when all the lights were out, these things did move. A corpse was a thing that had moved – given a certain condition – Life. What if there were a condition, given which these things could move? What if such conditions were present now? What if all of them – Napoleon, yellow-white from his death sleep – the beasts from the Amphitheatre, gore dribbling from their jaws – that soldier with the legs – all were drawing near to him in this full silence? Those death masks of Robespierre and Mirabeau, they might float down through the darkness till they touched his face. That head of Madame de Lamballe on the pike might be thrust at him from behind the pillar. The silence throbbed with sounds that could not quite be heard.

"You fool," he said to himself, "your dinner has disagreed with you, with a vengeance. Don't be an ass. The whole lot are only a set of big dolls."

He felt for his matches, and lighted a cigarette. The gleam of the match fell on the face of the corpse in front of him. The light was brief, and it seemed, somehow, impossible to look, by that light, in every corner where one would have wished to look. The match burnt his fingers as it went out; and there were only three more matches in the box.

It was dark again, and the image left on the darkness was that of the corpse in front of him. He thought of his dead friend. When the cigarette was smoked out, he thought of him more and more, till it seemed that what lay on the bier was not wax. His hand reached forward, and drew back more than once. But at last he made it touch the bier, and through the blackness travel up along a lean, rigid arm to the wax face that lay there so still. The touch was not reassuring. Just so, and not otherwise, had his dead friend's face felt, to the last touch of his lips: cold, firm, waxen. People always said the dead were "waxen." How true that was! He had never thought of it before. He thought of it now.

He sat still, so still that every muscle ached, because if you wish to hear the sounds that infest silence, you must be very still indeed. He thought of Edward, and of the string he had meant to tie to one of the figures.

"That wouldn't be needed," he told himself. And his ears ached with listening – listening for the sound that, it seemed, *must* break at last from that crowded silence.

He never knew how long he sat there. To move, to go up, to batter at the door and clamour to be let out – that one could have done if one had had a lantern, or even a full matchbox. But in the dark, not knowing the turnings, to feel one's way among these things that were so like life and yet were not alive – to touch, perhaps, these faces that were not dead, and yet felt like death. His heart beat heavily in his throat at the thought.

No, he must sit still till morning. He had been hypnotised into this state, he told himself, by Edward, no doubt; it was not natural to him.

Then suddenly the silence was shattered. In the dark something moved. And, after those sounds that the silence teemed with, the noise seemed to him thunder-loud. Yet it was only a very, very little sound, just the rustling of drapery, as though something had turned in its sleep. And there was a sigh – not far off.

Vincent's muscles and tendons tightened like fine-drawn wire. He listened. There was nothing more: only the silence, the thick silence.

The sound had seemed to come from a part of the vault where, long ago, when there was light, he had seen a grave being dug for the body of a young girl martyr.

"I will get up and go out," said Vincent. "I have three matches. I am off my head. I shall really be nervous presently if I don't look out."

He got up and struck a match, refused his eyes the sight of the corpse whose waxen face he had felt in the blackness, and made his way through the crowd of figures. By the match's flicker they seemed to make way for him, to turn their heads to look after him. The match lasted till he got to a turn of the rock-hewn passage. His next match showed him the burial scene: the little, thin body of the martyr, palm in hand, lying on the rock floor in patient waiting, the grave-digger, the mourners. Some standing, some kneeling, one crouched on the ground.

This was where that sound had come from, that rustle, that sigh. He had thought he was going away from it: instead, he had come straight to the spot where, if anywhere, his nerves might be expected to play him false.

"Bah!" he said, and he said it aloud, "the silly things are only wax. Who's afraid?" His voice sounded loud in the silence that lives with the wax people. "They're only wax," he said again, and touched with his foot, contemptuously, the crouching figure in the mantle.

And, as he touched it, it raised its head and looked vacantly at him, and its eyes were mobile and alive. He staggered back against another figure, and dropped the match. In the new darkness he heard the crouching figure move towards him. Then the darkness fitted in round him very closely.

"What was it exactly that sent poor Vincent mad: you've never told me?" Rose asked the question. She and Edward were looking out over the pines and tamarisks, across the blue Mediterranean. They were very happy, because it was their honeymoon.

He told her about the Musée Grévin and the wager, but he did not state the terms of it.

"But why did he think you would be afraid?"

He told her why.

"And then what happened?"

"Why, I suppose he thought there was no time like the present – for his five pounds, you know – and he hid among the wax-works. And I missed my train, and *I* thought there was no time like the present. In fact, dear, I thought if I waited I should have time to make certain of funking it, so I hid there, too. And I put on my big black capuchon, and sat down right in one of the wax-work groups – they couldn't see me from the passage where you walk. And after they put the lights out I simply went to sleep; and I woke up – and there was a light, and I heard some one say: 'They're only wax,' and it was Vincent. He thought I was one of the wax people, till I looked at him; and I expect he thought I was one of them even then, poor chap. And his match went out, and while I was trying to find my railway reading-lamp that I'd got near me, he began to scream, and the night watchman came running. And now he thinks every one in the asylum is made of wax, and he screams if they come near him. They have to put his food beside him while he's asleep. It's horrible. I can't help feeling as if it were my fault, somehow."

"Of course it's not," said Rose. "Poor Vincent! Do you know I never *really* liked him." There was a pause. Then she said: "But how was it *you* weren't frightened?"

"I was," he said, "horribly frightened. I – I – it sounds idiotic, but I thought I should go mad at first – I did really: and yet I *had* to go through with it. And then I got among the figures of the people in the Catacombs, the people who died for – for things, don't you know, died in such horrible ways. And there they were, so calm – and believing it was all all right. And I thought about what they'd gone through. It sounds awful rot I know, dear – but I expect I was sleepy. Those wax people, they sort of seemed as if they were alive, and were telling me there wasn't anything to be frightened about. I felt as if I were one of them, and they were all my friends, and they'd wake me if anything went wrong, so I just went to sleep."

"I think I understand," she said. But she didn't.

"And the odd thing is," he went on, "I've never been afraid of the dark since. Perhaps his calling me a coward had something to do with it."

"I don't think so," said she. And she was right. But she would never have understood how, nor why.

III
THE STRANGER WHO MIGHT HAVE BEEN OBSERVED

"There he goes – isn't he simply detestable!" She spoke suddenly, after a silence longer than was usual to her; she was tired, and her voice was a note or two above its habitual key. She blushed, a deep pink blush of intense annoyance, as the young man passed down the long platform among the crowd of city men and typewriting girls, patiently waiting for the belated train to allow them to go home from work.

"Oh, do you think he heard? Oh, Molly – I believe he did!"

"Nonsense!" said Molly briskly, "of course he didn't. And I must say I don't think he's so bad. If he didn't look so sulky he wouldn't be *half* bad, really. If his eyebrows weren't tied up into knots, I believe he'd look quite too frightfully sweet for anything."

"He's exactly like that Polish model we had last week. Oh, Molly, he's coming back again."

Again he passed the two girls. His expression was certainly not amiable.

"How long have you known him?" Molly asked.

"I *don't* know him. I tell you I only see him on the platform at Mill Vale. He and I seem to be the only people – the only decent people – who've found out the new station. He goes up by the 9.1 every day, and so do I. And the train's always late, so we have the platform and the booking office to ourselves. And there we sit, or stand, or walk, morning after morning like two stuck pigs in a trough of silence."

"Don't jumble your metaphors, though you very nearly carried it off with the trough, I own. Stuck pigs don't walk – in troughs, or anywhere else."

"Well, you know what I mean – "

"But what do you want the wretched man to do? He can't speak to you: it wouldn't be proper – "

"Proper – why not? We're human beings, not wild beasts. At least, I'm a human being."

"And he's a beast – I see."

"I wish I were a man," said Nina. "There he is again. His nose goes up another half inch every time he passes me. What's he got to be so superior about? If I were a man I'd certainly pass the time of day with a fellow-creature if I were condemned to spend from ten to forty minutes with it six days out of the seven."

"I expect he's afraid you'd want to marry him. My brother Cecil says men are always horribly frightened about that."

"Your brother Cecil!" said Nina scornfully. "Yes; that's just the sort of thing anybody's brother Cecil *would* say. He simply looks down on me because I go third. He only goes second himself, too. Here's the train – "

The two Art students climbed into their third-class carriage, and their talk, leaving Nina's fellow-traveller, washed like a babbling brook about the feet of great rocks, busied itself with the old Italian Masters, painting as a mission, and the aims of Art – presently running through flatter country and lapping round perspective, foreshortening, tones, values high lights and the preposterous lisp of the anatomy lecturer.

Arrived at Mill Vale the Slade students jumped from their carriage to meet a wind that swept grey curtains of rain across the bleak length of the platform.

"And we haven't so much as a rib of an umbrella between us," sighed Molly, putting her white handkerchief over the "best" hat which signalised her Saturday to Monday with her friend. "You're right: that man is a pig. There he goes with an umbrella big enough for all three of us. Oh, it's too bad!

He's putting it down – he's running. He runs rather well. He's exactly like the cast of the Discobolus in the Antique Room."

"Only his manners have not that repose that stamps the cast. Come on – don't stand staring after him like that. We'd better run, too."

"He'll think we're running after him. Oh, bother – "

A moment of indecision, and Nina had turned her skirt over her head, and the two ran home to the little rooms where Nina lived – in the house of an old servant. Nina had no world of relations – she was alone. In the world of Art she had many friends, and in the world of Art she meant to make her mark. For the present she was content to make the tea, and then to set feet on the fender for a cosy evening.

"Did you see him coming out of church?" Nina asked next day. "He looked sulkier than ever."

"I can't think why you bother about him," said the other girl. "He's not really interesting. What do you call him?"

"Nothing."

"Why, everything has a name, even a pudding. *I* made a name for him at once. It is 'the stranger who might have been observed – '"

They laughed. After the early dinner they went for a walk. None of your strolls, but a good steady eight miles. Coming home, they met the stranger: and then they talked about him again. For, fair reader, I cannot conceal from you that there are many girls who do think and talk about young men, even when they have not been introduced to them. Not really nice girls like yourself, fair reader – but ordinary, commonplace girls who have not your delicate natures, and who really do sometimes experience a fleeting sensation of interest even in the people whose names they don't know.

Next morning they saw him at the station. The 9.1 took the bit in its teeth, and instead of being, as usual, the 9.30 something, became merely the 9.23. So for some twenty odd minutes the stranger not only might have been, but was, observed by four bright and critical eyes. I don't mean that my girls stared, of course. Perhaps you do not know that there are ways of observing strangers other than by the stare direct. He looked sulkier than ever: but he also had eyes. Yet he, too, was far from staring, so far that the indignant Nina broke out in a distracted whisper: "There! you see! I'm not important enough for him even to perceive my existence. I'm always expecting him to walk on me. I wonder whether he'd apologise when he found I wasn't the station door-mat?"

The stranger shrugged his shoulders all to himself in his second-class carriage when the train had started.

"'Simply detestable!' But how one talks prose without knowing it, all along the line! How can I ever have come enough into her line of vision to be distinguished by an epithet! And why this one? Detestable!"

The epithet, however distinguishing, seemed somehow to lack charm.

At Cannon Street Station the stranger looked sulkier than Nina had ever seen him. She said so, adding: "Than I've ever seen him? Oh – I'm wandering. He looks sulkier than I'vsquo;ve ever seen any one – sulkier than I've ever dreamed possible. Pig – "

Through the week, painting at the school and black and white work in the evenings filled Nina's mind to the exclusion even of strangers who might, in more leisured moments, seem worthy of observation. She was aware of the sulky one on platforms, of course, but talking about him to Molly was more amusing somehow than merely thinking of him. When it came to thinking, the real, the earnest things of life – the Sketch Club, the chance of the Melville Nettleship Prize, the intricate hideousness of bones and muscles – took the field and kept it, against strangers and acquaintances alike.

Saturday, turning this week's scribbled page to the fair, clear page of next week, brought the stranger back to her thoughts, and to eyes now not obscured by close realities.

He passed her on the platform, with a dozen bunches of violets in his hands.

Outside, on the railway bridge, the red and green lamps glowed dully through deep floods of yellow fog. The platform was crowded, the train late. When at last it steamed slowly in, the crowd surged towards it. The third-class carriages were filled in the moment. Nina hurried along the platform peering into the second-class carriages. Full also.

Then the guard opened the way for her into the blue-cloth Paradise of a first-class carriage; and, just as the train gave the shudder of disgust which heralds its shame-faced reluctant departure, the door opened again, and the guard pushed in another traveller – the "stranger who might – " of course. The door banged, the train moved off with an air of brisk determination. A hundred yards from the platform it stopped dead.

There were no other travellers in that carriage. When the train had stood still for ten minutes or so, the stranger got up and put his head out of the window. At that instant the train decided to move again. It did it suddenly, and, exhausted by the effort, stopped after half a dozen yards' progress with so powerful a turn of the brake that the stranger was flung sideways against Nina, and his elbow nearly knocked her hat off.

He raised his own apologetically – but he did not speak even then.

"The wretch!" said Nina hotly; "he might at least have begged my pardon."

The stranger sat down again, and began to read the *Spectator*. Nina had no papers. The train moved on an inch or two, and the reddening yellow of the fog seemed like a Charity blanket pressed against each window. Three of the bunches of violets shook and vibrated and slipped, the train moved again and they fell on the floor of the carriage. Nina watched their trembling in an agony of irritation induced by the fog, the delay, and the persistent silence of her companion. When the flowers fell, she spoke.

"You've dropped your flowers," she said. Again a bow, a silent bow, and the flowers were picked up.

"Oh, I'm desperate!" Nina said inwardly. "He must be mad – or dumb – or have a vow of silence – I wonder which?"

The train had not yet reached the next station, though it had left the last nearly an hour before.

"Which is it? Mad, dumb, or a monk? I *will* find out. Well, it's his own fault; he shouldn't be so aggravating. I'm going to speak to him. I've made up my mind."

In the interval between decision and action the train in a sudden brief access of nervous energy got itself through a station, and paused a furlong down the line exhausted by the effort.

The stranger had put down his *Spectator* and was gazing gloomily out at the fog.

Nina drew a deep breath, and said – at least she nearly said: "What a dreadful fog!"

But she stopped. That seemed a dull beginning. If she said that he would think she was commonplace, and she had that sustaining inward consciousness, mercifully vouchsafed even to the dullest of us, of being really rather nice, and not commonplace at all. But what should she say? If she said anything about the colour of the fog and Turner or Whistler, it might be telling, but it would be of the shop shoppy. If she began about books – the *Spectator* suggested this – she would stand as a prig confessed. If she spoke of politics she would be an ignorant impostor soon exposed. If – But Nina took out her watch and resolved: "When the little hand gets to the quarter I *will* speak. Whatever I say, I'll say something."

And when the big hand did get to the quarter Nina did speak.

"Why shouldn't we talk?" she said.

He looked at her; and he seemed to be struggling silently with some emotion too deep for words.

"It's so silly to sit here like mutes," Nina went on hurriedly – a little frightened, now she had begun, but more than a little determined not to be frightened. "If we were at a dance we shouldn't know any more of each other than we do now – and you'd have to talk then. Why shouldn't we now?"

Then the stranger spoke, and at the first sentence Nina understood exactly what reason had decided the stranger that they should not talk. Yet now they did. If this were a work of fiction I

shouldn't dare to pretend that the train took more than two hours to get to Mill Vale. But in a plain record of fact one must speak the truth. The train took exactly two hours and fifty minutes to cover the eleven miles between London and Mill Vale. After that first question and reply Nina and the stranger talked the whole way.

He walked with her to the door of her lodging, and she offered him her hand without that moment of hesitation which would have been natural to any heroine, because she had debated the question of that handshake all the way from the station, and made up her mind just as they reached the church, a stone's throw from her home. When the door closed on her he went slowly back to the churchyard to lay his violets on a grave. Nina saw them there next day when she came out of church. She saw him too, and gave him a bow and a very small smile, and turned away quickly. The bow meant: "You see I'm not going to speak to you. You mustn't think I want to be always talking to you." The smile meant: "But you mustn't think I'm cross. I'm not – only – "

In the hot, stuffy "life-room" at the Slade next day Molly teased with ill-judged bread-crumbs an arm hopelessly ill drawn, and chattered softly to Nina, who in the Saturday solitude had drawn her easel behind her friend's "donkey." "It's all very well here when you first come in, but when once you *are* warm, oh dear, how warm you are! Why do models want such boiling rooms? Why can't they be soaked in alum or myrrh or something to harden their silly skins so that they won't mind a breath of decent air? And I believe the model's deformed – she certainly is from where I am. Oh, look at my arm! I ask you a little – look at the beastly thing. Foreshortened like this it looks like a fillet of veal with a pound of sausages tied on to it for a hand. Oh, my own and only Nina – save the sinking ship!"

"It ought to go more like *that*," Nina said with indicative brush, "and don't keep on rubbing out so fiercely. You'll get paralysed with bread – it's a disease, you know. I heard Tonks telling you so only the other day – "

"It's rather a good phrase: I wonder where he got it? He was rather nice that day," said Molly. "Oh, this arm! It's no good – I believe the model's moved – I tell you I *must*." More bread. Nina re-absorbed in her canvas. "Yours is coming well. What's the matter with you to-day? You're very mousy. Has the 'stranger who might' been scowling more than usual? Or have you got a headache? I'm sure this atmosphere's enough to make you. Did you see him this morning? Have you fainted at his feet yet? Has he relented in the matter of umbrellas? I'm sure he can't have passed the whole week without some act of grumpiness."

Nina leaned back and looked through half-shut eyes at the model's beautiful form and stupid face.

"I went down in the same carriage with him on Thursday," she said slowly.

"You did? Did he rush into the third class, where angels like himself ought to fear to tread?"

"There was a fog. Thirds all full, and seconds too. The guard bundled us both in, and the train started – and it took three or four hours to get down."

"Any one else in the carriage?"

"Not so much as a mouse."

"What *did* you do?"

"Do? What could I do? We sat in opposite corners as far as we could get from each other, exchanging occasional glances of mutual detestation for about an hour and a half. He knocked me down and walked on me once, and took his hat off very politely and beg-pardoningly, but he never said a word. He didn't even say he thought I was the door-mat. And then some cabbages of his fell off the seat."

"Sure they weren't thistles?"

"Vegetables of some sort. And I said: 'You've dropped your – whatever they were.' And he just bowed again in a thank-you-very-much-but-I'm-sure-I-don't-know-what-business-it-is-of-yours sort of way. Do leave that bread alone."

Molly, lost in the interest of the recital, was crumbling the bread as though the floor of the life-room were the natural haunt of doves and sparrows.

"Well?" she said.

"Well?" said Nina.

"Why ever didn't you ask him to put the window up, or down, or something? I would have – just to hear if he has a voice."

"It wouldn't have been any good. He'd just have bowed again, and I'd had enough bows to last a long time. No: I just said straight out that we were a couple of idiots to sit there gaping at each other with our tongues out, and why on earth shouldn't we talk?"

"You never did!"

"Or words to that effect, anyhow. And then he said – "

A long pause.

"What?"

"He told me why he never spoke to strangers."

"What a slap in the face! You poor – "

"Oh, he didn't say it like *that*, you silly idiot. And it was quite a good reason."

"What was it?"

No answer.

"Tell me exactly what he said."

"He said, 'I – I – I – ' At any rate, I'm satisfied, and I rather wish we hadn't called him pigs and beasts, and things like that."

"Well?"

"That's all."

"Aren't you going to tell me the reason? Oh, very well – you leave it to my guessing? Of course it's quite evident he's hopelessly in love with you, and never ventured to speak for fear of betraying his passion. But, encouraged by your advances – "

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.