

The Dweller on the Threshold eBook

The Dweller on the Threshold by Robert Smythe Hichens

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I

When Evelyn Malling, notorious because of his sustained interest in Psychical Research and his work for Professor Stepton, first met the Rev. Marcus Harding, that well-known clergyman was still in the full flow of his many activities. He had been translated from his labors in Liverpool to a West End church in London. There he had proved hitherto an astonishing success. On Hospital Sundays the total sums collected from his flock were by far the largest that came from the pockets of any congregation in London. The music in St. Joseph's was allowed by connoisseurs, who knew their Elgar as well as their Goss, their Perosi as well as their Bach, and their Wesley, to be remarkable. Critical persons, mostly men, who sat on the fence between Orthodoxy and Atheism, thought highly of Mr. Harding's sermons, and even sometimes came down on his side. And, of all signs surely the most promising for a West End clergyman's success, smart people flocked to him to be married, and Arum lilies were perpetually being carried in and out of his chancel, which was adorned with Morris windows. He was married to a woman who managed to be admirable without being dull, Lady Sophia, daughter of the late Earl of Mansford, and sister of the present peer. He was comfortably off. His health as a rule was good, though occasionally he suffered from some obscure form of dyspepsia. And he was still comparatively young, just forty-eight.

Nevertheless, as Evelyn Malling immediately perceived, Mr. Harding was not a happy man.

In appearance he was remarkable. Of commanding height, with a big frame, a striking head and countenance, and a pair of keen gray eyes, he looked like a man who was intended by nature to dominate. White threads appeared in his thick brown hair, which he wore parted in the middle. But his face, which was clean-shaven, had not many telltale lines. And he did not look more than his age.

The sadness noted by Malling was at first evasive and fleeting, not indelibly fixed in the puckers of a forehead, or in the down-drawn corners of a mouth. It was as a thin, almost impalpable mist, that can scarcely be seen, yet that alters all the features in a landscape ever so faintly. Like a shadow it traveled across the eyes, obscured the forehead, lay about the lips. And as a shadow lifts it lifted. But it soon returned, like a thing uneasy that is becoming determined to discover an abiding-place.

Malling's first meeting with the clergyman took place upon Westminster Bridge on an afternoon in early May, when London seemed, almost like a spirited child, to be flinging itself with abandon into the first gaieties of the season. Malling was alone, coming on foot from Waterloo. Mr. Harding was also on foot, with his senior curate, the Rev. Henry Chichester, who was an acquaintance of Malling, but whom Malling had not seen for a considerable period of time, having been out on his estate in Ceylon. At the moment when Malling arrived upon the bridge the two clergymen were standing by the parapet

on the Parliament side, looking out over the river. As he drew near to them the curate glanced suddenly round, saw him, and uttered an involuntary exclamation which attracted Mr. Harding's attention.

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"Telepathy!" said Chichester, shaking Malling by the hand. "I believe I looked round because I knew I should see you. Yet I supposed you to be still in Ceylon." He glanced at the rector rather doubtfully, seemed to take a resolution, and with an air almost of doggedness added, "May I?" and introduced the two men to one another.

Mr. Harding observed the new-comer with an interest that was unmistakable.

"You are the Mr. Malling of whom Professor Stepton has spoken to me," he said,— "who has done so much experimental work for him?"

"Yes."

"The professor comes to my church now and then."

"I have heard him say so."

"You saw we were looking at the river? Before I came to London I was at Liverpool, and learned there to love great rivers. There is something in a great river that reminds us—"

He caught his curate's eye and was silent.

"Are you walking my way?" asked Malling. "I am going by the Abbey and Victoria Street to Cadogan Square."

"Then we will accompany you as far as Victoria Station," said the rector.

"You don't think it would be wiser to take a hansom?" began Chichester. "You remember—"

"No, no, certainly not. Walking always does me good," rejoined Mr. Harding, almost in a tone of rebuke.

The curate said nothing more, and the three men set out toward Parliament Square, Malling walking between the two clergymen.

He felt embarrassed, and this surprised him, for he was an extremely self-reliant man and entirely free from shyness. At first he thought that possibly his odd discomfort arose from the fact that he was in company with two men who, perhaps, had quite recently had a difference which they were endeavoring out of courtesy to conceal from him. Perhaps there had been a slight quarrel over some parish matter. Certainly when he first spoke with them there had been something uneasy, a suspicion of strain, in the manner of both. But then he remembered how, before Chichester had turned round, they had been leaning amicably above the river.

No, it could not be that. He sought mentally for some other reason. But while he did so he talked, and endeavored to rid himself promptly of the unwelcome feeling that beset him.

In this effort, however, he did not at first succeed. The “conditions” were evidently unsatisfactory. He wondered whether if he were not walking between the two men he would feel more comfortable, and presently, at a crossing, he managed to change his place. He was now next to Mr. Harding, who had the curate on his other side, and at once he felt more at his ease. The rector of St. Joseph’s led the conversation, in which Malling joined, and at first the curate was silent. But presently Malling noticed a thing that struck him as odd. Chichester began to “chip in” now and then, and whenever he did so it was either to modify what Mr. Harding

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had just said, or to check him in what he was saying, or abruptly to introduce a new topic of talk. Sometimes Mr. Harding did not appear to notice these interruptions; at other times he obviously resented them; at others again he yielded with an air of anxiety, almost of fear, to his curate's attenuations or hastened to follow his somewhat surprising leads down new conversational paths. Malling could not understand Chichester. But it became evident to him that for some reason or other the curate was painfully critical of his rector, as sometimes highly sensitive people are critical of members of their own family. And Mr. Harding was certainly aware of this critical attitude, and at moments seemed to be defiant of it, at other moments to be almost terrorized by it.

All that passed, be it noted, passed as between gentlemen, rather glided in the form of nuance than trampled heavily in more blatant guise. But Evelyn Malling was a highly trained observer and a man in whom investigation had become a habit. Now that he was no longer ill at ease he became deeply interested in the relations between the two men with whom he was walking. He was unable to understand them, and this fact of course increased his interest. Moreover he was surprised by the change he observed in Chichester.

Although he had never been intimate with Henry Chichester, he had known him fairly well, and had summed him up as a very good man and a decidedly attractive man, but marred, as Malling thought, by a definite weakness of character. He had been too amiable, too ready to take others on their own valuation of themselves, too kind-hearted, and too easily deceived. The gentleness of a saint had been his, but scarcely the firmness of a saint. Industrious, dutiful, and conscientious, he had not struck Malling as a man of strong intellect, though he was a cultivated and well-educated man. Though not governed by his own passions,—when one looked at him one had been inclined to doubt whether he had any,—he had seemed prone to be governed by those about him, at any rate in little matters of every day. His charm had consisted in his transparent goodness, and in an almost gay kindness which had seemed to float round him like an atmosphere. To look into his face had been to look at the happiness which comes only to those who do right things, and are at peace with their own souls.

What could have happened to change this charming, if too pliant, personality into the critical, watchful, almost—so at moments it seemed to Malling—aggressive curate who was now, always in a gentlemanly way, making things rather difficult for his rector?

And the matter became the more mysterious when Malling considered Mr. Harding. For here was a man obviously of dominant personality. Despite his fleeting subservience to Chichester, inexplicable to Malling, he was surely by far the stronger of the two, both in intellect and character. Not so saintly, perhaps, he was more likely to influence others. Firmness showed in his forcible chin, energy in the large lines of his mouth, decision in

his clear-cut features. Yet there was something contradictory in his face. And the flitting melancholy, already remarked, surely hinted at some secret instability, perhaps known only to Harding himself, perhaps known to Chichester also.

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When the three men came to the turning at the corner of the Grosvenor Hotel, Chichester stopped short.

"Here is our way," he said, speaking across Mr. Harding to Malling.

The rector looked at Malling.

"Have you far to go?" he asked, with rather a tentative air.

"I live in Cadogan Square."

"Of course. I remember. You told us you were going there."

"Good-by," said Chichester. "We are taking the underground to South Kensington."

"I think I shall walk," said the rector.

"But you know we are due—"

"There is plenty of time. Tell them I shall be there at four."

"But really—"

"Punctually at four. I will walk on with Mr. Malling."

"I really think you had better not," began Chichester. "Over-exertion—"

"Am I an invalid?" exclaimed Mr. Harding, almost sharply.

"No, no, of course not. But you remember that yesterday you were not quite well."

"That is the very reason why I wish to walk. Exercise always does my dyspepsia good."

"Let us all walk," said the curate, abruptly.

But this was obviously not Mr. Harding's intention.

"I want you to go through the minutes and the accounts before the meeting," he said, in a quieter but decisive voice. "We will meet at the School at four. You will have plenty of time if you take the train. And meanwhile Mr. Malling and I will go on foot together as far as Cadogan Square."

Chichester stood for a moment staring into Mr. Harding's face, then he said, almost sulkily:

"Very well. Good-by."

He turned on his heel, and was lost in the throng near the station.

It seemed to Malling that an expression of relief overspread his companion's face.

"You don't mind my company for a little longer, I hope?" said the rector.

"I shall be glad to have it."

They set out on their walk to Cadogan Square. After two or three minutes of silence the rector remarked:

"You know Chichester well?"

"I can hardly say that. I used to meet him sometimes with some friends of mine, the Crespignys. But I haven't seen him for more than two years."

"He's a very good fellow."

"An excellent fellow."

"Perhaps a little bit limited in his outlook. He has been with me at St. Joseph's exactly two years."

The rector seemed about to say more, then shut his large mouth almost with a snap. Malling made no remark. He was quite certain that snap was merely the preliminary to some further remark about Chichester. And so it proved. As they came to St. Peter's Eaton Square, the rector resumed:

"I often think that it is a man's limitations which make him critical of others. The more one knows, the wider one's outlook, the readier one is to shut one's eyes to the foibles, even to the faults, of one's neighbors. I have tried to impress that upon our friend Chichester."

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"Doesn't he agree with you?"

"Well—it's difficult to say, difficult to say. Shall we go by Wilton Place, or—?"

"Certainly."

"Professor Stepton has talked to me about you from time to time, Mr. Malling."

"He's a remarkable man," said Malling almost with enthusiasm.

"Yes. He's finding his way to the truth rather by the pathway of science than by the pathway of faith. But he's a man I respect. And I believe he'll get out into the light. You've done a great deal of work for him, I understand, in—in occult directions."

"I have made a good many careful investigations at his suggestion."

"Exactly. Now"—Mr. Harding paused, seemed to make an effort, and continued—"we know very little even now, with all that has been done, as to—to the possibilities—I scarcely know how to put it—the possibilities of the soul."

"Very little indeed," rejoined Malling.

He was considerably surprised by his companion's manner, but was quite resolved not to help him out.

"The possibilities of one soul, let us say, in connection with another," continued the rector, almost in a faltering voice. "I often feel as if the soul were a sort of mysterious fluid, and that when we what is called influence another person, we, as it were, submerge his soul fluid in our own, as a drop of water might be submerged in an ocean."

"Ah!" said Malling, laconically.

Mr. Harding shot a rather sharp glance at him.

"You don't object to my getting on this subject, I hope?" he observed.

"Certainly not."

"Perhaps you think it rather a strange one for a clergyman to select?"

"Oh, no. I have known many clergymen deeply interested in Stepton's investigations."

Mr. Harding's face, which had been cloudy, cleared.

"It seems to me," he said, "that we clergymen have a special reason for desiring Stepton, and all Stepton's assistants, to make progress. It is true, of course, that we live by faith. And nothing can be more beautiful than a childlike faith in the Great Being who is above all worlds, in the *anima mundi*. But it would be unnatural in us if we did not earnestly desire that our faith be proved, scientifically proved, to be well-founded. I speak now of the faith we Christians hold in a life beyond the grave. I know many people who think it very wrong in a clergyman to mix himself up in any occult experiments. But I don't agree with them."

It was now Malling's turn to look sharply at his companion.

"Have you made many experiments yourself, may I ask?" he said very bluntly.

The clergyman started, and was obviously embarrassed by the question.

"I! Oh, I was speaking generally. I am a very busy man, you see. What with my church and my parish, and one thing and another, I get very little time for outside things. Still I am greatly interested, I confess, in all that Stepton is doing."

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"Does Mr. Chichester share your interest?" said Malling.

"In a minor degree, in a minor degree," answered the rector, rather evasively.

They were now in Sloane Street and Malling said:

"I must turn off here."

"I'll go with you as far as your door if you've no objection," said the rector, who seemed very loath to leave his companion. "It's odd how men change, isn't it?"

"As they grow older? But surely development is natural and to be expected?"

"Certainly. But when a man changes drastically, sheds his character and takes on another?"

"You are talking perhaps of what is called conversion?"

"Well, that would be an instance of what I mean, no doubt. But there are changes of another type. We clergymen, you know, mix intimately with so many men that we are almost bound to become psychologists if we are to do any good. It becomes a habit with many of us to study closely our fellow-men. Now I, for instance; I cannot live at close quarters with a man without, almost unconsciously, subjecting him to a minute scrutiny, and striving to sum him up. My curates, for example—"

"Yes?" said Malling.

"There are four of them, our friend Chichester being the senior one."

"And you have 'placed' them all?"

"I thought I had, I thought so—but—"

Mr. Harding was silent. Then, with a strange abruptness, and the air of a man forced into an action against which something within him protested, he said:

"Mr. Malling, you are the only person I know who, having been acquainted with Henry Chichester, has at last met him again after a prolonged interval of separation. Two years, you said. People who see a man from day to day observe very little or nothing. Changes occur and are not noticed by them. A man and his wife live together and grow old. But does either ever notice when the face of the other begins first to lose its bloom, to take on that peculiar, unmistakable stamp that the passage of the years sets on us all? Few of us really see what is always before us. But the man who comes back—he sees. Tell me the honest truth, I beg of you. Do you or do you not, see a great change in Henry Chichester?"

The rector's voice had risen while he spoke, till it almost clamored for reply. His eyes were more clamorous still, insistent in their demand upon Malling. Nevertheless voice and eyes pushed Malling toward caution. Something within him said, "Be careful what you do!" and, acting surprise, he answered:

"Chichester changed! In what way?"

The rector's countenance fell.

"You haven't observed it?"

"Remember I've only seen him to-day and walking in the midst of crowds."

"Quite true! Quite true!"

Mr. Harding meditated for a minute, and then said:

"Mr. Malling, I daresay my conduct to-day may surprise you. You may think it odd of me to be so frank, seeing that you and I have not met before. But Stepton has told me so much about you that I cannot feel we are quite strangers. I should like you to have an opportunity of observing Henry Chichester without prejudice. I will say nothing more. But if I invite you to meet him, in my house or elsewhere, will you promise me to come?"

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"Certainly, if I possibly can."

"And your address?"

Malling stopped and, smiling, pointed to the number outside a house.

"You live here?"

Mr. Harding took a small book and a pencil from his pocket and noted down the address.

"Good-by," he said. "I live in Onslow Gardens—Number 89."

"Thank you. Good-by."

The two men shook hands. Then Mr. Harding went on his way toward South Kensington, while Malling inserted his latch-key into the door of Number 7b, Cadogan Square.

II

Evelyn Malling was well accustomed to meeting with strange people and making investigations into strange occurrences. He was not easily surprised, nor was he easily puzzled. By nature more skeptical than credulous, he had a cool brain, and he was seldom, if ever, the victim of his imagination. But on the evening of the day in question he found himself continually dwelling, and with a curiously heated mind, upon the encounter of that afternoon. Mr. Harding's manner in the latter part of their walk together had—he scarcely knew why—profoundly impressed him. He longed to see the clergyman again. He longed, almost more ardently, to pay a visit to Henry Chichester. Although the instinct of caution, which had perhaps been developed in him by his work among mediums, cranks of various kinds, and charlatans, had prevented him from letting the rector know that he had been struck by the change in the senior curate, that change had greatly astonished him. Yet was it really so very marked? He had noticed it before his attention had been drawn to it. That he knew. But was he not now, perhaps, exaggerating its character, "suggestioned" as it were by the obvious turmoil of Mr. Harding? He wondered, and was disturbed by his wonderment. Two or three times he got up, with the intention of jumping into a cab, and going to Westminster to find out if Professor Stepton was in town. But he only got as far as the hall. Then something seemed to check him. He told himself that he was in no fit condition to meet the sharp eyes of the man of science, who delighted in his somewhat frigid attitude of mind toward all supposed supernormal manifestations, and he returned to his study and tried to occupy himself with a book.

On the occasion of his last return, just as he was about to sit down, his eyes chanced to fall on an almanac framed in silver which stood on his writing-table. He took it up and stared at it. May 8, Friday—May 9, Saturday—May 10, Sunday. It was May 9. He put the almanac back on the table with a sudden sense of relief. For he had come to a decision.

To-morrow he would attend morning service at St. Joseph's.

Malling was not a regular church-goer. He belonged to the Stepton breed. But he was an earnest man and no scoffer, and some of his best friends were priests and clergymen. Nevertheless it was in a rather unusual go-to-meeting frame of mind that he got into a tail-coat and top hat, and set forth in a hansom to St. Joseph's the next morning.

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He had never been there before. As he drew near he found people flowing toward the great church on foot, in cabs and carriages. Evidently Mr. Harding had attractive powers, and Malling began to wonder whether he would have any difficulty in obtaining the seat he wanted, in some corner from which he could get a good view both of the chancel and the pulpit. Were vergers “briable”? What an ignoramus he was about church matters!

He smiled to himself as he paid the cabman and joined the stream of church-goers which was passing in through the open door.

Just as he was entering the building someone in the crowd by accident jostled him, and he was pushed rather roughly against a tall lady immediately before him. She turned round with a startled face, and Malling hastily begged her pardon.

“I was pushed,” he said. “Forgive me.”

The lady smiled, her lips moved, doubtless in some words of conventional acceptance, then she disappeared in the throng, taking her way toward the left of the church. She was a slim woman, with a white streak in her dark hair just above the forehead. Her face, which was refined and handsome, had given to Malling a strong impression of anxiety. Even when it had smiled it had looked almost tragically anxious, he thought. The church was seated with chairs, and a man, evidently an attendant, told him that all the chairs in the right and left aisles were free. He made his way to the right, and was fortunate enough to get one not far from the pulpit. Unluckily, from it he could only see the left-hand side of the choir. But the preacher would be full in his view. The organ sounded; the procession appeared. Over the heads of worshipers—he was a tall man—Malling perceived both Mr. Harding and Chichester. The latter took his place at the end of the left-hand row of light-colored oaken stalls next to the congregation. Malling could see him well. But the rector was hidden from him. He fixed his eyes upon Chichester.

The service went on its way. The music was excellent. A fair young man, who looked as if he might be a first-rate cricketer, one of the curates no doubt, read the lessons. Chichester intoned with an agreeable light tenor voice. During the third hymn, “Fight the Good Fight,” Mr. Harding mounted into the pulpit. He let down the brass reading-desk. He had no notes in his hands. Evidently he was going to preach extempore. After the “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” had been pronounced, Malling settled himself to listen. He felt tensely interested. Both Mr. Harding and Chichester were now before him, the one as performer—he used the word mentally, with no thought of irreverence—the other as audience. He could study both as he wished to study them at that moment.

Chichester was a small, cherubic man, with blue eyes, fair hair, and neat features, the sort of man who looks as if when a boy he must have been the leading choir-boy in a

cathedral. There was nothing powerful in his face, but much that was amiable and winning. His chin and his forehead were rather weak. His eyes and his mouth looked good. Or—did they?

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Malling found himself wondering as Mr. Harding preached.

And was Mr. Harding the powerful preacher he was reputed to be?

At first he held his congregation. That was evident. Rows of rapt faces gazed up at him, as he leaned over the edge of the pulpit, or stood upright with his hands pressed palm downward upon it. But it seemed to Malling that he held them rather because of his reputation, because of what they confidently expected of him, because of what he had done in the past, than because of what he was actually doing. And presently they slipped out of his grasp. He lost them.

The first thing that is necessary in an orator, if he is to be successful with an audience, is confidence in himself, a conviction that he has something to say which is worth saying, which has to be said. Malling perceived that on this Sunday morning Mr. Harding possessed neither self-confidence nor conviction; though he made a determined, almost a violent, effort to pretend that he had both. He took as the theme of his discourse self-knowledge, and as his motto—so he called it—the words, “Know thyself.” This was surely a promising subject. He began to treat it with vigor. But very soon it became evident that he was ill at ease, as an actor becomes who cannot get into touch with his audience. He stumbled now and then in his sentences, harked back, corrected a phrase, modified a thought, attenuated a statement. Then, evidently bracing himself up, almost aggressively he delivered a few passages that were eloquent enough. But the indecision returned, became more painful. He even contradicted himself. A “No, that is not so. I should say—” communicated grave doubts as to his powers of clear thinking to the now confused congregation. People began to cough and to shift about in their chairs. A lady just beneath the pulpit unfolded a large fan and waved it slowly to and fro. Mr. Harding paused, gazed at the fan, looked away from it, wiped his forehead with a handkerchief, grasped the pulpit ledge, and went on speaking, but now with almost a faltering voice.

The congregation were doubtless ignorant of the cause of their pastor’s perturbation, but Malling felt sure that he knew what it was.

The cause was Henry Chichester.

On the cherubic face of the senior curate, as he leaned back in his stall while Mr. Harding gave out the opening words of the sermon, there had been an expression that was surely one of anxiety, such as a master’s face wears when his pupil is about to give some public exhibition. That simile came at once into Malling’s mind. It was the master listening to the pupil, fearing for, criticizing, striving mentally to convey help to the pupil. And as the sermon went on it was obvious to Malling that the curate was not satisfied with it, and that his dissatisfaction was, as it were, breaking the rector down. At certain statements of Mr. Harding looks of contempt flashed

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over Chichester's face, transforming it. The anxiety of the master, product of vanity but also of sympathy, was overlaid by the powerful contempt of a man who longs to traverse misstatements but is forced by circumstances to keep silence. And so certain was Malling that the cause of Mr. Harding's perturbation lay in Chichester's mental attitude, that he longed to spring up, to take the curate by the shoulders and to thrust him out of the church. Then all would be well. He knew it. The rector's self-confidence would return and, with it, his natural powers.

But now the situation was becoming painful, almost unbearable.

With every sentence the rector became more involved, more hesitating, more impotent. The sweat ran down his face. Even his fine voice was affected. It grew husky. It seemed to be failing. Yet he would not cease. To Malling he gave the impression of a man governed by a secret obstinacy, fighting on though he knew it was no use, that he had lost the combat. Malling longed to cry out to him, "Give it up!"

The congregation coughed more persistently, and the lady with the fan began to ply her instrument of torture almost hysterically.

Suddenly Malling felt obliged to look toward the left of the crowded church. Sitting up very straight, and almost craning his neck, he stared over the heads of the fidgeting people and met the eyes of a woman, the lady with the streak of white hair against whom he had pushed when coming in.

There was a look almost of anguish on her face. She turned her eyes toward Mr. Harding. At the same instant the rector saw Malling in the congregation. He stopped short, muttered an uneven sentence, then, forcing his voice, uttered in unnaturally loud tones the "Now to God the Father," *et cetera*.

Henry Chichester rose in his stall with an expression of intense thankfulness, which yet seemed somehow combined with a sneer.

The collection was made.

Before the celebration some of the choir and two of the clergy, of whom Mr. Harding was one, left the church. Henry Chichester and the fair, athletic-looking curate remained. Malling took his hat and made his way slowly to the door. As he emerged a young man stopped him and said:

"If you please, sir, the rector would like to speak to you if you could wait just a moment. You are Mr. Malling, I believe."

"Yes. How could you know?"

“Mr. Harding told me what you were like, sir, and that you were wearing a tie with a large green stone in it. Begging your pardon, sir.”

“I will wait,” said Malling, marveling at the rector’s rapid and accurate powers of observation.

Those of the congregation who had not remained for the celebration were quickly dispersing, but Malling now noticed that the lady with the white lock was, like himself, waiting for some one. She stood not far from him. She was holding a parasol, and looking down; she moved its point to and fro on the ground. Several people greeted her. Almost as if startled she glanced up quickly, smiled, replied. Then, as they went on, she again looked down. There was a pucker in her brow. Her lips twitched now and then.

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Suddenly she lifted her head, turned and forced her quivering mouth to smile. Mr. Harding had come into sight round the corner of the church.

"Ah, Mr. Malling," he said, "so you have stayed. Very good of you. Sophia, let me introduce Mr. Malling to you—my wife, Lady Sophia."

The lady with the white lock held out her hand.

"You have heard Professor Stepton speak of Mr. Malling, haven't you?" added the rector to his wife.

"Indeed I have," she answered.

She smiled again kindly, and as if resolved to throw off her depression began to talk with some animation as they all walked together toward the street. Directly they reached it the rector said:

"Are you engaged to lunch to-day, Mr. Malling?"

"No," answered Malling.

Lady Sophia turned to him and said:

"Then I shall be informal and beg you to lunch with us, if you don't mind our being alone. We lunch early, at one, as my husband is tired after his morning's work and eats virtually nothing at breakfast."

"I shall be delighted," said Malling. "It's very kind of you."

"We always walk home," said the rector.

He sighed. It was obvious that he was in low spirits after the failure of the morning, but he tried to conceal the fact, and his wife tactfully helped him. Malling praised the music warmly, and remarked on the huge congregation.

"I scarcely thought I should find a seat," he added.

"It is always full to the doors in the morning," said Lady Sophia, with a cheerfulness that was slightly forced.

She glanced at her husband, and suddenly added, not without a decided touch of feminine spite:

"Unless Mr. Chichester, the senior curate, is preaching."

"My dear Sophy!" exclaimed Mr. Harding.



"Well, it is so!" she said, with a sort of petulance.

"Perhaps Mr. Chichester is not gifted as a preacher," said Malling.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," said the rector.

"My husband never criticizes his—swans," said Lady Sophia, with delicate malice, and a glance full of meaning at Malling. "But I'm a woman, and my principles are not so high as his."

"You do yourself an injustice," said the rector. "Here we are."

He drew out his latch-key.

Before lunch Malling was left alone for a few minutes in the drawing-room with Lady Sophia. The rector had to see a parishioner who had called and was waiting for him in his study. Directly her husband had left the room Lady Sophia turned to Malling and said:

"Had you ever heard my husband preach till this morning?"

"No, never," Malling answered. "I'm afraid I'm not a very regular church-goer. I must congratulate you again on the music at St. Joseph's. It is exceptional. Even at St. Anne's Soho—"

Almost brusquely she interrupted him. She was obviously in a highly nervous condition; and scarcely able to control herself.

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"Yes, yes, our music is always good, of course. So glad you liked it. But what I want to say is that you haven't heard my husband preach this morning."

Malling looked at her with curiosity, but without astonishment. He might have acted a part with her as he had the previous day with her husband. But, as he looked, he came to a rapid decision, to be more frank with the woman than he had been with the man.

"You mean, of course, that your husband was not in his best vein," he said. "I won't pretend that I didn't realize that."

"You didn't hear him at all. He wasn't himself—simply."

She sat down on a sofa and clasped her hands together.

"I cannot tell you what I was feeling," she added. "And he used to be so full of self-confidence. It was his great gift. His self-confidence carried him through everything. Nothing could have kept him back if—"

Suddenly she checked herself and looked, with a sort of covert inquiry, at Malling.

"You must think me quite mad to talk like this," she said, with a return to her manner when he first met her.

"Shall I tell you what I really think?" he asked, leaning forward in the chair he had taken.

"Yes, do, do!"

"I think you are very ambitious for your husband and that your ambition for him has received a perhaps mysterious—check."

Before she could reply the door opened and Mr. Harding reappeared.

At lunch he carefully avoided any reference to church matters, and they talked on general subjects. Lady Sophia showed herself a nervously intelligent and ardent woman. It seemed to Malling obvious that she was devoted to her husband, "wrapped up in" him—to use an expressive phrase. Any failure on his part upset her even more than it did him. Secretly she must still be quivering from the public distresses of the morning. But she now strove to aid the rector's admirable effort to be serene, and proved herself a clever talker, and well informed on the events of the day. Of her Malling got a fairly clear impression.

But his impression of her husband was confused and almost nebulous.

"Do you smoke?" asked Mr. Harding, when lunch was over.

Malling said that he did.

“Then come and have a cigar in my study.”

“Yes, do go,” said Lady Sophia. “A quiet talk with you will rest my husband.”

And she went away, leaving the two men together.

Mr. Harding’s study looked out at the back of the house upon a tiny strip of garden. It was very comfortably, though not luxuriously, furnished, and the walls were lined with bookcases. While his host went to a drawer to get the cigar-box, Malling idly cast his eyes over the books in the shelves nearest to him. He always liked to see what a man had to read. The first book his eyes rested upon was Myers’s “Human Personality.” Then came a series of works by Hudson, including “Psychic Phenomena,” then Oliver Lodge’s “Survival of Man,” “Man and the Universe,” and “Life and Matter.” Farther along were works by Lowes Dickinson and Professor William James, Bowden’s “The Imitation of Buddha” and Inge’s “Christian Mysticism.” At the end of the shelf, bound in white vellum, was Don Lorenzo Scupoli’s “The Spiritual Combat.”

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A drawer shut, and Mailing turned about to take the cigar which Mr. Harding offered him.

"The light is rather strong, don't you think?" Mr. Harding said, when the two men had lit up. "I'll lower the blind."

He did so, and they sat down in a sort of agreeable twilight, aware of the blaze of an almost un-English sun without.

Malling settled down to his cigar with a very definite intention to clear up his impressions of the rector. The essence of the man baffled him. He had known more about Lady Sophia in five minutes than he knew about Mr. Harding now, although he had talked with him, walked with him, heard him preach, and watched him intently while he was doing so. His confusion and distress of the morning were comprehended by Malling. They were undoubtedly caused by the preacher's painful consciousness of the presence and criticism of one whom, apparently, he feared, or of whose adverse opinion at any rate he was in peculiar dread. But what was the character of the man himself? Was he saint or sinner, or just ordinary, normal man, with a usual allowance of faults and virtues? Was he a man of real force, or was he painted lath? The Chichester episodes seemed to point to the latter conclusion. But Malling was too intelligent to take everything at its surface value. He knew much of the trickery of man, but that knowledge did not blind him to the mystery of man. He had exposed charlatans. Yet he had often said to himself, "Who can ever really expose another? Who can ever really expose himself?" Essentially he was the Seeker. And he was seldom or never dogmatic. A friend of his, who professed to believe in transmigration, had once said of him, "I'm quite certain Malling must have been a sleuth-hound once." Now he wished to get on a trail.

But Mr. Harding, who on the previous day had been almost strangely frank about Henry Chichester, to-day had apparently no intention to be frank about himself. Though he had desired Malling's company, now that they were together alone he showed a reserve through which, Malling believed, he secretly wanted to break. But something held him back. He talked of politics, government and church, the spread of science, the follies of the day. And Malling got little nearer to him. But presently Malling happened to mention the modern craze for discussing intimately, or, as a Frenchwoman whom he knew expressed it, "*avec un luxe de detail*," matters of health.

"Yes, yes," responded Mr. Harding. "It is becoming almost objectionable, almost indecent. At the same time the health of the body is a very interesting subject because of its effect upon the mind, even, so it seems sometimes, upon the very nature of a man. Now I—" he struck the ash off the end of his cigar—"was, I might almost say, the victim of my stomach in the pulpit this morning."

"You were feeling ill?"



“Not exactly ill. I have a strong constitution. But I suffer at times from what the doctors call nervous dyspepsia. It is a very tiresome complaint, because it takes away for the time a man’s confidence in himself, reduces him to the worm-level almost; and it gives him absurd ideas. Now this morning in the pulpit I had an attack of pain and uneasiness, and my nerve quite gave out. You must have noticed it.”

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"I saw that you were troubled by something."

"Something! It was that. My poor wife was thoroughly upset by it. You know how sensitive women are. To hold a crowd of people a man must be strong and well, in full possession of his powers. And I had a good subject."

"Splendid."

"I'll treat it again—treat it again."

The rector shifted in his chair.

"Do you think," he said after a pause, "that it is possible for another, an outsider, to know a man better than he knows himself?"

"In some cases, yes," answered Malling.

"But—as a rule?"

"There is the saying that outsiders see most of the game."

"Then why should we mind when all are subject to criticism!" exclaimed Mr. Harding, forcibly.

Evidently he was startled by his own outburst, for instantly he set about to attenuate it.

"What I mean is that men ought not to care so much as most of them undoubtedly do what others think about them."

"It certainly is a sign of great weakness to care too much," said Malling. "But some people have a quite peculiar power of impressing their critical thoughts on others. These spread uneasiness around them like an atmosphere."

"I know, I know," said the rector, with an almost hungry eagerness. "Now surely one ought to keep out of such an atmosphere, to get out of it, and to keep out of it."

"Why not?"

"But—but—how extraordinary it is, the difficulty men have in getting away from things! Haven't you noticed that?"

"Want of moral strength," said Malling, laconically.

"You think so?"

"Don't you?"



At this moment there was a knock at the door. Mr. Harding started.

"How impossible it is to get a quiet moment," he said with acute irritation. "Come in!" he called out.

The footman appeared.

"Mr. Chichester has called to see you, sir."

The rector's manner changed. He beckoned to the man to come into the room and to shut the door. The footman, looking surprised, obeyed.

"Where is he, Thomas?" asked Mr. Harding, in a lowered voice. "In the hall?"

"No, sir. As you were engaged I showed him up into the drawing-room."

"Oh, very well. Thank you. You can go."

The footman went out, still looking surprised.

Just as he was about to close the door his master said:

"Wait a moment!"

"Sir?"

"Was her ladyship in the drawing-room?"

"No, sir. Her ladyship is lying down in the boudoir."

"Ah. That will do."

The footman shut the door.

Directly he was gone the rector got up with an air of decision.

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"Mr. Malling," he said, "perhaps I ought to apologize to you for treating you with the abruptness allowable in a friend, but surprising in an acquaintance, indeed in one who is almost a stranger. I do apologize. My only excuse is that I know you to be a man of exceptional trend of mind and unusual ability. I know this from Professor Stepton. But there's another thing. As I told you yesterday, you are the only person of my acquaintance who, having been fairly intimate with Henry Chichester, has not seen anything of him during the two years he has been with me as my coadjutor. Now what I want you to do is this: will you go upstairs and spend a few minutes alone with Chichester? Tell him I am detained, but am coming in a moment. I'll see to it that you are not interrupted. I'll explain to my wife. And, of course, I rely on you to make the matter appear natural to Chichester, not to rouse his—but I am sure you understand. Will you do this for me?"

"Certainly," said Malling, with his most prosaic manner. "Why not?"

"Why not? Exactly. There's nothing objectionable in the matter. But—" Mr. Harding's manner became very earnest, almost tragic. "I'll ask you one thing—afterward you will tell me the truth, exactly how Chichester impresses you now in comparison with the impression you got of him two years ago. You—you have no objection to promising to tell me?"

Malling hesitated.

"But is it quite fair to Chichester?" he said. "Suppose I obtained, for instance, a less favorable, or even an unfavorable impression of him now? You are his rector. I hardly think—"

The rector interrupted him.

"I'll leave it to you," he said. "Do just as you please. But, believe me, I have a very strong reason for wishing to know your opinion. I need it. I need it."

There was a lamentable sound in his voice.

"If I feel it is right I will give it to you," said Malling.

The rector opened the door of the study.

"You know your way?"

"Yes."

Malling went upstairs. Mr. Harding stood watching him from below till he disappeared.

III

When Malling opened the door of the drawing-room Chichester was standing by one of the windows, looking out into Onslow Gardens. He turned round, saw Malling, and uttered an exclamation.

“You are here!”

His light tenor voice sounded almost denunciatory, as if he had a right to demand an explanation of Malling’s presence in Mr. Harding’s house, and as he came away quickly from the window, he repeated, with still more emphasis:

“You are here!”

“Lunching—yes,” replied Malling, imperturbably.

He looked at Chichester and smiled.

“You have no objection, I hope?”

His words and manner evidently brought the curate to a sense of his own unconventionality. He held out his hand.

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"I beg your pardon. Your coming in surprised me. I had no idea"—his blue eyes went searchingly over Malling's calm face—"that you could be here. I thought you and the rector were complete strangers till I introduced you yesterday."

"So we were."

Malling sat down comfortably on a sofa. His action evidently recalled Chichester's mind to the fact that he was to see the rector.

"Isn't the rector coming to see me?" he asked.

"Almost directly. He's busy for a few minutes. We were smoking together in his study."

"You seem to—you seem to have made great friends!" said Chichester, with a sort of forced jocularly.

"Great friends! They're hardly made in a moment. I happened to be at church this morning—"

"At church—where?" exclaimed the curate.

"At St. Joseph's. And Mr. Harding kindly asked me to lunch."

"You were at church at St. Joseph's this morning?" said Chichester.

He sat down by Malling and stared into his face.

"Did you—did you stay for the sermon?"

"Certainly. I came for the sermon. I had never heard Mr. Harding preach."

"No? No? Well, what did you think of it? What did you think of it?"

The curate spoke nervously, and seemed to Malling to be regarding him with furtive anxiety.

"It was obvious that Mr. Harding wasn't in good form this morning," Malling said. "He explained the matter after lunch."

"He *explained* the matter!" said Chichester, with a rising voice, in which there was an almost shrill note of suspicion.

"Yes. He told me he was often the victim of nervous dyspepsia, and that he had an attack of it while in the pulpit this morning."

"He told you it was nervous dyspepsia!"

"I have just said so."

The curate looked down.

"I advised him not to walk all the way home yesterday," he said gloomily. "You heard me."

"You think it was that?"

"He never will take advice from any one. That's his—one of his great faults. Whatever he thinks, whatever he says, must be right. You, as a layman, probably have no idea how a certain type of clergyman loves authority."

This remark struck Malling as in such singularly bad taste—considering where they were, and that one of them was Mr. Harding's guest, the other his curate—that only his secret desire to make obscure things clear prevented him from resenting it.

"It is one of the curses of the Church," continued Chichester, "this passion for authority, for ruling, for having all men under one's feet as it were. If men would only listen, take advice, see themselves as they really are, how much finer, how much greater, they might become!"

"See themselves as others see them! Eh?" said Malling. "But do you mean that a rector should depend on his curate's advice rather than on his own judgment?"

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"And why not?" said Chichester. "Rector—curate—archbishop—what does it matter? The point is not what rank in the hierarchy a man has, but what, and how, does he see? A street boy may perceive a truth that a king is blind to. At that moment the street boy is greater than the king. Do you deny it?"

"No," said Malling, amazed at the curate's excitement, but showing no astonishment.

"But it's a terrible thing to see too clearly!" continued Chichester, almost as if talking to himself, absorbed. "A terrible thing!"

He looked up at Malling, and almost solemnly he said:

"Are you still going on with all those investigations?"

"When I have any spare time, I often spend some of it in that sort of work," answered Malling, lightly.

It was his way to make light of his research work, and indeed he seldom mentioned it unless he was forced to do so.

"Do you think it is right?" said Chichester, earnestly.

"Right?"

"To strive to push one's way into hidden regions."

"If I didn't think it right I shouldn't do it," retorted Malling, but without heat.

"And—for clergymen?" questioned Chichester, leaning forward, and dropping his small, thin hands down between his knees.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think it right for clergymen to indulge themselves—for it is indulgence—in investigations, in attempts to find out more than God has chosen to reveal to us?"

The man of science in Malling felt impatient with the man of faith in Chichester.

"Does it never occur to you that the *anima mundi* may have hidden certain things from the minds of mortals just in order to provide them with a field to till?" he said, with a hint of sarcasm. "Wasn't the fact that the earth revolves round the sun, instead of the sun round the earth, hidden from every living creature till Galileo discovered it? Do you think Galileo deserved our censure?"

“Saul was punished for consulting the witch of Endor,” returned Chichester. “And the Roman Catholic Church forbids her children to deal in occult things.”

“You can’t expect a man like me, a disciple of Stepton, to take the Roman Catholic view of such a matter.”

“You are not a clergyman,” said Chichester.

Malling could not help smiling.

“You think the profession carries with it certain obligations,” he said. “No doubt it does. But I shall never believe that one of them is to shut your eyes to any fact in the whole scheme of Creation. Harm can never come from truth.”

“If I could believe that!” Chichester cried out.

“Do you mean to tell me you don’t believe it?”

Chichester looked at Malling for quite a minute without replying. Then he got up, and said, with a changed voice and manner:

“If the rector doesn’t come to see me I shall have to go. Sunday is not a holiday, you know, for us clergymen.”

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He drew out his watch and looked at it.

"I shall have to go. I'm taking the Children's Service."

Malling got up too.

"Is it getting late?" he said. "Perhaps—"

At this moment the door was gently opened and Mr. Harding appeared.

"Oh, Chichester," he said. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. What is it? Would you like to come to my study?"

"I must be off," said Malling. "May I say good-by to Lady Sophia? Or perhaps she is resting and would rather not be disturbed."

"I'm sure she would wish to say good-by to you," said the rector. "I'll just ask her."

He shot a quick glance from one man to the other and went out of the room, leaving the door open behind him.

Directly he was gone the curate said: "It has been such a pleasure to me to renew my acquaintance with you, Mr. Malling. Are you going to be long in London?"

"All the season, I think."

"Then I hope we may meet again soon, very soon."

He hesitated, put one hand in his pocket, and brought out a card-case.

"I should like to give you my address."

"And let me give you mine."

They exchanged cards.

"I expect you'll be very busy," said the curate, rather doubtfully.

Then he added, like a man urged on by some strong, almost overpowering desire to do a thing not quite natural to him:

"But I wish you could spare an evening to come to dine with me. I live very modestly, of course. I'm in rooms, in Hornton Street—do you know it?—near Campden Hill?—Number 4a—as you'll see on my card. I wonder—"

"I shall be delighted to come."



"When?"

"Whenever you are kind enough to ask me."

"Could you come on Wednesday week? It's so unfortunate, I have such a quantity of parish engagements—that is my first evening free."

"Wednesday week, with pleasure."

"At half after seven?"

"That will suit me perfectly."

"And"—he looked toward the door—"I shall be greatly obliged to you if you won't mention to the rector the fact that you are coming. He—"

"My wife's in the boudoir," said Mr. Harding, coming into the room at this moment.

He stood by the door.

Malling shook hands with Chichester, and went to say good-by to his hostess.

Mr. Harding shut the drawing-room door.

"This is the way," he said. "Well, Mr. Malling? Well?"

"You mean you want to know—?"

"Your impression of Chichester."

The rector stopped on the landing.

"Do you find him much changed?"

Malling shrugged his shoulders.

"Possibly—a little. He may have become rather firmer in manner, a trifle more decisive."

"Firmer! More decisive, you say!"

"But surely that is only natural, working—as he has done, I understand, under a man such as yourself for two years."

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"Such as myself! Then you think he's caught something of my manner and way of looking at things? You think—"

"Really, it's difficult to say," interrupted Malling. "He's developed, no doubt. But very few people don't. I suppose you've trained him."

"I!" said the rector. "I train a man like Chichester!"

In his voice there was a bitter irony.

"Is that you, Mr. Malling?" said the voice of Lady Sophia. "I was lying down with a book. This is my little room."

She looked pale, almost haggard, as the sunshine fell upon her through the open window.

Malling took his leave at once and she did not attempt to detain him.

"I hope you'll come again," she said, as they shook hands. "Perhaps on another Sunday morning, to church and lunch. I'll let you know."

She said the last words with a significance which made Malling understand that she did not wish him to come to church at St. Joseph's again till she gave him the word.

The rector let him out of the house. Not another word was spoken about Henry Chichester. As his guest walked away the rector stood, bareheaded, looking after him, then, as Malling turned the corner of the gardens, with a heavy sigh, and the unconscious gesture of a man greatly troubled in mind, he stepped back into his hall and shut the door behind him.

IV

A week later, Malling paid a visit to Professor Stepton. He had heard nothing of the Hardings and Chichester since the day of the luncheon in Onslow Gardens, but they had seldom been absent from his thoughts, and more than once he had looked at the words, "Dine with H.C." in his book of engagements, and had found himself wishing that "Hornton Street, Wednesday" was not so far distant.

The professor lived in Westminster, in a house with Adam ceilings, not far from the Houses of Parliament. He was unmarried, and Malling found him alone after dinner, writing busily in his crowded library. He had but recently returned from Paris, whither he had traveled to take part in a series of "sittings" with the famous medium, Mrs. Groeber.



In person the professor was odd, without being specially striking. He was of medium height, thin and sallow, with gray whiskers, thick gray hair, bushy eyebrows, and small, pointed and inquiring features which gave him rather the aspect of a prying bird. His eyes were little and sparkling. His mouth, strangely enough, was ecclesiastical. He nearly always wore very light-colored clothes. Even in winter he was often to be seen clad in yellow-gray tweeds, a yellow silk necktie, and a fawn-colored Homburg hat. And no human being had ever encountered him in a pair of boots unprotected by spats. One peculiarity of his was that he did not possess a walking-stick, another that he had never—so at least he declared—owned a pocket-handkerchief, having had no occasion to use one at any moment of his long and varied life. When it rained he sometimes carried an umbrella, generally shut. At other times he moved briskly along with his arms swinging at his sides.

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As Malling came in he looked up and nodded.

"Putting down all about Mrs. Groeber," he observed.

"Anything new or interesting?" asked Malling.

"Just the usual manifestations, done in full light, though."

He laid aside his pen, while Malling sat down.

"A letter from Flammarion this morning," he said. "But all about Halley's comet, of course. What is it?"

Now the professor's "What is it?" was not general, but particular, and was at once understood to be so by Malling. It did not mean "Why have you come?" but "Why are you obsessed at this moment, and by what?"

"Let's have the mystery," he added, leaning his elbows on his just dried manuscript, and resting his sharp little chin on his doubled fists.

Yet Malling had hinted at no mystery, and had come without saying he was coming.

"You know a clergyman called Marcus Harding?" said Malling.

"Of St. Joseph's. To be sure, I do."

"Do you know also his senior curate, Henry Chichester?"

"No."

"Have you heard of him?"

"Oh dear, yes. And I fancy I've seen him at a distance."

"You heard of him from Harding, I suppose."

"Exactly, and Harding's wife."

"Oh, from Lady Sophia!"

"Who hates him."

"Since when?" said Malling, emphatically.

"I couldn't say. But I was only aware of the fact about a month ago."



"Have you any reason to suppose that Harding has been making any experiments?"

"In church music, biblical criticism, or what?"

"Say in psychical research?"

"No."

"Or that Chichester has?"

"No."

"Hasn't Harding ever talked to you on the subject?"

"He has tried to," said the professor, rather grimly.

"And you didn't encourage him?"

"When do I encourage clergymen to talk about psychical research?"

Malling could not help smiling.

"I have some reason—at least I believe so—to suppose that Harding and his curate Chichester have been making some experiments in directions not entirely unknown to us," he observed. "And what is more"—he paused—"what is more," he continued, "I am inclined to think that those experiments may have been crowned with a success they little understand."

Down went the professor's fists, his head was poked forward in Malling's direction, and his small eyes glittered almost like those of a glutton who sees a feast spread before him.

"The experiments of two clergymen in psychical research crowned with success!" he barked out.

"If so, I shall see what I can do in the pulpit—the Abbey pulpit!"

He got up, and walking slightly sidewise, with his hands hanging, and his fingers opening and shutting, went over to a chair close to Malling's.

"Get on!" he said.

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"I'm going to. I want your advice."

When Malling had finished what he had to say, the professor, who had interrupted him two or three times to ask pertinent questions, put his hands on his knees and thrust his head forward.

"You said you wanted advice," he said. "What about?"

"I wish you to advise me how I had better proceed."

"You really think the matter important?" asked the professor.

Malling looked slightly disconcerted.

"You don't?" he said.

"You are deducing a great deal from not very much. That's certain," observed the professor.

"You never knew Chichester," retorted Malling. "I did—two years ago."

"Suppose you are right, suppose these two reverend gentlemen have done something such as you suppose—and that there has been a result, a curious result, what have we to do with it? Tell me that."

"You mean that I have no right to endeavor to make a secret investigation into the matter. But I'm positive both the men want help from me. I don't say either of them will ask it. But I'm certain both of them want it."

"Two clergymen!" said the professor. "Two clergymen! That's the best of it—if there is an it, which there may not be."

"Harding spoke very warmly of you."

"Good-believing man! Now, I do wonder what he's been up to. I do wonder. Perhaps he'd have told me but for my confounded habit of sarcasm, my way of repelling the amateur—repelling!" His arms flew out. "There's so much silliness beyond all bearing, credulity beyond all the patience of science. Table-turning women, feminine men! 'The spirits guide me, Professor, in every smallest action of my life!'—Wuff!—the charlatan batters and breeds. And the bile rises in one till Carlyle on his worst day might have hailed one as a brother bilious, and so denunciatory—Jeremiah nervously dyspeptic! And when you opened your envelop and drew out a couple of clergymen, really, really! But perhaps I was in a hurry! Clergymen in a serious fix, too, because of unexpected and not understood success! And I talk of repelling the *amateur*!"

Suddenly he paused and, with his bushy eyebrows twitching, looked steadily at Malling.

"I leave it to you," he said. "Take your own line. But don't forget that, if there's anything in it, development will take place in the link. The link will be a center of combat. The link will be an interesting field for study."

"The link?" said Malling, interrogatively.

"Goodness gracious me! Her ladyship! Her ladyship!" cried out the professor. "What are you about, Malling?"

And he refused to say another word on the matter till Malling, after much more conversation on other topics, got up to go. Then, accompanying him to the front door, the professor said:

"You know / think it's probably all great nonsense."

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“What?”

“Your two black-coated friends. You bustle along at such a pace. Remember, I have made more experiments than you have, and I have never come upon an exactly similar case. I don’t know whether such a thing can be. No more do you—you’ve guessed. Now, guessing is not at all scientific. At the same time you’ve proved you can be patient. If there is anything in this it’s profoundly interesting, of course.”

“Then you advise me—?”

“If in doubt, study Lady Sophia. Good night.”

As Malling went away into the darkness he heard the professor snapping out to himself, as he stood before his house bareheaded:

“Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings! *Tres bien!* But—reverend gentlemen of St. Joseph’s! I shall have to look for telergic power in my acquaintance Randall Cantuar, when I want it! By Jove!”

“If in doubt, study Lady Sophia.” As Malling thought over these parting words, he realized their wisdom and wondered at his own short-sightedness.

He had sent his cards to Onslow Gardens after the luncheon with the Hardings. He wished now he had called and asked for Lady Sophia. But doubtless he would have an opportunity of being with her again. If she did not offer him one, he would make one for himself.

He longed to see her with Henry Chichester.

During the days that elapsed before “Hornton Street, Wednesday” he considered a certain matter with sedulous care. His interview with Stepton had not been fruitless. Stepton always made an effect on his mind. Casual and jerky though his manner was, obstinate as were his silences at certain moments, fragmentary as was his speech, he had a way of darting at the essential that set him apart from most men. Malling remembered a horrible thing he had once seen in the Sahara, a running gazelle killed by a falcon. The falcon, rising high in the blue air, had followed the gazelle, had circled, poised, then shot down and, with miraculous skill, struck into the gazelle’s eye. Unerringly from above it had chosen out of the vast desert the home for its cruel beak. Somewhat in similar fashion, so Malling thought, Stepton rose above things, circled, poised, sank, and struck into the heart of the truth unerringly.

Perhaps he was able to do this because he was able to mount, falconwise!

Malling would have given a good deal to have Stepton with him in this affair, despite the professor’s repellent attitude toward the amateur. Well, if there really was anything in it,

if strangeness rose out of the orthodox bosom of St. Joseph's, if he—Malling—found himself walking in thick darkness, he meant to bring Stepton into the matter, whether at Stepton's desire or against it. Meanwhile he would see if there was enlightenment in Horton Street.

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On the Wednesday the spell of fine weather which had made London look strangely vivacious broke up, and in the evening rain fell with a gentle persistence. Blank grayness took the town. A breath as of deep autumn was in the air. And the strange sadness of cities, which is like no other sadness, held the spirit of Evelyn Malling as he walked under an umbrella in the direction of Kensington High Street. He walked, to shake off depression. But in his effort he did not succeed. All that he saw deepened his melancholy; the soldiers starting out vaguely from barracks, not knowing what to do, but free for a time, and hoping, a little heavily, for some adventure to break the military monotony of their lives; the shopgirls, also in hope of something to “take them out of themselves”—pathetic desire of escape from the little prison, where the soul sits, picking its oakum sometimes, in its cell of flesh!—young men making for the parks, workmen for the public houses, an old woman, in a cap, peering out of an upper window in Prince’s Gate; Italians with an organ, and a monkey that looked as if it were dying of nostalgia; women hurrying—whither?—with anxious faces, and bodies whose very shapes, and whose every movement, suggested, rather proclaimed, worry.

Malling knew it was the rain, the possessive grayness, which troubled his body to-night, and through his body troubled his spirit. His nostrils inhaled the damp, and it seemed to go straight into his essence, into the mystery that was he. His eyes saw no more blue, and it was as if they drew a black shutter over all the blue in his heart, blotting it out. People became doomed phantoms, because the weather had changed and because London knows how to play Cassandra to the spirit of many a man. To Malling, as he presently turned to the right, Hornton Street looked like an alley leading straight to the pit of despair, and when he tapped on the blistered green door of the small house where the curate lived, it was as if he tapped seeking admittance to all the sorrowful things that had been brought into being to beset his life with blackness.

A neat servant-girl opened the door. There was a smell of roast mutton in the passage. So far well. Malling took off his hat and coat, hung them up on a hook indicated by the plump red hand of the maid, and then followed her upstairs. The curate was in possession of the first floor.

Malling knew that it would be a case of folding-doors and perhaps of curtains of imitation lace. It was a case of folding-doors. But there was a dull green hue on the walls that surely bespoke Henry Chichester’s personal taste. There were bookcases, there were mezzotints, there were engravings of well-known pictures, and there were armchairs not covered with horsehair. There was also a cottage piano, severely nude. In the center of the room stood a small square table covered with a cloth and laid for two persons.

“I’ll tell Mr. Chichester, sir.”

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The maid went out. From behind the folding-doors came to Malling's ears the sound of splashing water, then a voice saying, certainly to the maid, "Thank you, Ellen, I will come." And in three minutes Chichester was in the room, apologizing.

"I was kept late in the parish. There's a good deal to do."

"You're not overworked?" asked Malling.

"Do I look so?" said Chichester, quickly.

He turned round and gazed at himself in an oval Venetian mirror which was fixed to the wall just behind him. His manner for a moment was oddly absorbed as he examined his face.

"London life tells on one, I suppose," he said, again turning. "We change, of course, in appearance as we go on."

His blue eyes seemed to be seeking something in Malling's impenetrable face.

"Do you think," he said, "I am much altered since we used to meet two years ago? It would of course be natural enough if I were."

Malling looked at him for a minute steadily.

"In appearance, you mean?"

"Of course."

"To-night it seems to me that you have altered a good deal."

"To-night?" said the curate, as if with anxiety.

"If there is any change,—and I think there is,—it seems to me more apparent to-night than it was when I saw you the other day."

Ellen, the maid, entered the room bearing a tray on which was a soup-tureen.

"Oh, dinner!" said Chichester. "Let us sit down. You won't mind simple fare, I hope. We are having soup, mutton,—I am not sure what else."

"Stewed fruit, sir," interpolated Ellen.

"To be sure! Stewed fruit and custard. Open the claret, Ellen, please."

"Have you been in these rooms long?" asked Malling, as they unfolded their napkins.



“Two years. All the time I have been at St. Joseph’s. The rector told me of them. The curate who preceded me had occupied them.”

“What became of him?”

“He has a living in Northampton now. But when he left he had nothing in view.”

“He was tired of work at St. Joseph’s?”

“I don’t think he got on with the rector.”

The drip of the rain became audible outside, and a faint sound of footsteps on the pavement.

“Possibly I shall not stay much longer,” he added.

“No doubt you’ll take a living.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. But, in any case, I may not stay much longer—perhaps. That will do, Ellen; you may go and fetch the mutton. Put the claret on the table, please.”

When the maid was gone, he added:

“One doesn’t want a servant in the room listening to all one says. As she was standing behind me I had forgotten she was here. How it rains to-night! I hate the sound of rain.”

“It is dismal,” said Malling, thinking of his depression while he had walked to Hornton Street.

“Do you mind,” said the curate, slightly lowering his voice, “if I speak rather—rather confidentially to you?”

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"Not at all, if you wish to—"

"Well, now, you are a man of the world, you've seen many people. I wish you would tell me something."

"What is it?"

Ellen appeared with the mutton. As soon as she had put it on the table and departed, Chichester continued:

"How does Mr. Harding strike you? What impression does he make upon you?"

Eagerness, even more, something that was surely anxiety, shone in his eyes as he asked the question.

"He's a very agreeable man."

"Of course, of course! Would you say he was a man to have much power over others, his fellow-men?"

"Speaking quite confidentially—"

"Nothing you say shall ever go beyond us two."

"Then—I don't know that I should."

"He doesn't strike you as a man of power?"

"In the pulpit?"

"And out of it—especially out of it?"

"He may have been. But—perhaps he has lost in power. Dispersion, you know, does not make for strength."

Suddenly the curate became very pale.

"Dispersion—you say!" he almost stammered.

As if to cover some emotion, he looked at Mallings' plate, and added:

"Have some more? You won't? Then—"

He got up and rang the bell. Ellen reappeared, cleared away, and put the stewed fruit and custard on the table.



"Bring the coffee in ten minutes, Ellen. I won't ring."

"Very well, sir."

"Dispersion," said Chichester to Malling in a firmer voice, as Ellen disappeared.

"Concentration makes for strength. Mr. Harding seems to me mentally—what shall I say?—rather torn in pieces, as if preyed upon by some anxiety. Now, if you'll allow me to be personal, I should say that you have greatly gained in strength and power since I knew you two years ago."

"You—you observe a difference?" asked Chichester, apparently in great perturbation.

"A striking difference."

"And—and would you say I looked a happier, as well as a—a stronger man?"

"I couldn't with truth say that."

"Very few of us are happy," said Chichester, with trembling lips. "Poor miserable sinners as we are! And we clergymen, who set up to direct others—" he broke off.

He seemed greatly, strangely, moved.

"You must forgive me. I have had a very hard day's work!" he murmured. "The coffee will do me good. Let us sit in the armchairs, and Ellen can clear away. I wish I had two sitting-rooms."

He rang to make Ellen hurry. Till she came Malling talked about Italian pictures and looked at the curate's books. When she had cleared away, left the coffee, and finally departed, he sat down with an air of satisfaction. Chichester did not smoke, but begged Malling to light up, and gave him a cigar.

"Coffee always does one good," he said. "It acts directly on the heart, and seems to strengthen the whole body. I have had a trying day."

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"You look tired," said Malling.

The fact was that Chichester had never recovered the color he had so suddenly lost when they were discussing Mr. Harding.

"It's no wonder if I do," rejoined Chichester, in a voice that sounded hopeless.

He drank some coffee, seemed to make a strong effort to recover himself, and, with more energy, said:

"I asked you here because I wanted to renew a pleasant acquaintanceship, but also—you won't think me discourteous, I know—because—well, I had a purpose in begging you to come."

"Won't you tell me what it is?"

The curate shifted in his armchair, clasped and unclasped his hands. A mental struggle was evidently going on within him. Indeed, during the whole evening Malling had received from him a strong impression of combat, of confusion.

"I wanted to continue the discussion we began at Mr. Harding's the other day. You remember, I asked you not to tell him you were coming?"

"Yes."

"I think it's best to keep certain matters private. People so easily misunderstand one. And the rector has rather a jealous nature."

Malling looked at his companion without speaking. At this moment he was so strongly interested that he simply forgot to speak. Never, even at a successful sitting when, the possibility of trickery having been eliminated, a hitherto hidden truth seemed about to lift a torch in the darkness and to illumine an unknown world, had he been more absorbed by the matter in hand. Chichester did not seem to be struck by his silence, and continued:

"And then not every one is fitted to comprehend properly certain matters, to see things in their true light. Now the other day you said a thing that greatly impressed me, that I have never been able to get out of my mind since. You said, 'Harm can never come from truth.' I have been thinking about those words of yours, night and day, night and day. Tell me—did you mean them?"

The question came from Chichester's lips with such force that Malling was almost startled.

"Certainly I meant them," he answered.

“And if truth slays?”

“And is death the worst thing that can happen to a man, or to an idea—some wretched fallacy, perhaps, that has governed the minds of men, some gross superstition, some lie that darkens counsel?”

“You think if a man lives by a lie he is better dead?”

“Don’t you think so?”

“But don’t we all need a crutch to help us along on the path of life?”

“What! You, a clergyman, think that it is good to bolster up truth with lies?” said Mallory, with genuine scorn.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You implied it, I think.”

“Perhaps if you had worked among men and women as much as I have you would know how much they need. If you went abroad, say to Italy, and saw how the poor, ignorant people live happily oftentimes by their blind belief in the efficacy of the saints, would you wish to tear it from them?”

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"I think we should live by the truth, and I would gladly strike away a lie from any human being who was using it as a crutch."

"I thought that once," said Chichester.

The words were ordinary enough, but there was something either in the way they were said, or in Chichester's face as he said them, that made Malling turn cold.

To cover his unusual emotion, which he was ashamed of, and which he greatly desired to hide from his companion, he blew out a puff of cigar smoke, lifted his cup, and drank the rest of his coffee.

"May I have another cup?" he said. "It's excellent."

The coffee-pot was on the table. Chichester poured out some more.

"I will have another cup, too," he said. "How it wakes up the mind."

He glanced at Malling and added:

"Almost terribly sometimes."

"Yes. But—going back to our subject—don't you still think that men should live by the truth?"

"I think," began Chichester—"I think—"

It seemed as if something physical prevented him from continuing. He swallowed, as if forcing something down his throat.

"I think," he got out at last, "that few men know how terrible the face of truth can be."

His own countenance was contorted as he spoke, as if he were regarding something frightful.

"I think"—he turned right round in his chair to confront Malling squarely—"that *you* do not know."

For the first time he completely dominated Malling, Chichester the gentle, cherubic clergyman, whom Malling had thought of as good, but weak, and certainly as a negligible quantity. He dominated, because at that moment he made Malling feel as if he had some great possession of knowledge which Malling lacked.

"And you?" said Malling. "Do you know?"

The curate's lips worked, but he made no answer.

Malling was aware of a great struggle in his mind, as of a combat in which two forces were engaged. He got up, walked to the window, and stood as if listening to the rain.

"If only Stepton were here!" thought Malling.

There was a truth hidden from him, perhaps partly divined, obscurely half seen, but not thoroughly understood, as a whole invisible. Stepton would be the man to elucidate it, Malling thought. It lured him on, and baffled him.

"How it rains!" said the curate at last, without turning.

He bent down and opened the small window. The uneasy, almost sinister noise of rain in darkness entered the room, with the soft smell of moisture.

"Do you mind if we have a little air?" he added.

"I should like it," said Malling.

Chichester came back and sat down again opposite Malling. His expression had now quite changed. He looked calmer, gentler, weaker, and much more uninteresting. Crossing his legs, and folding his thin hands on his knees, he began to talk in his light tenor voice. And he kept the conversation going on church music, sacred art in Italy, and other eminently safe and respectable topics till it was time for Malling to go.

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Only when he was letting his guest out into the night did he seem troubled once more. He clasped Malling's hand in his, as if almost unaware that he was doing so, and said with some hesitation:

"Are you—are you going to see the rector again?"

"Not that I know of," said Malling, speaking the strict truth, and virtually telling a lie at the same time.

For he was determined, if possible, to see Mr. Harding, and that before very long.

"If I may say so," Chichester said, shifting from one foot to another and looking down at the rain-sodden pavement, "I wouldn't see him."

"May I ask you why?"

"You may get a wrong impression. Two years ago he was another man. Strangers, of course, may not know it, not realize it. But we who have lived with him do know it. Mr. Harding is going down the hill."

There was a note of deep sadness in his voice. Had he been speaking of himself, of his own decadence, his tone could scarcely have been more melancholy.

And for long Malling remembered the look in his eyes as he drew back to shut his door.

In the rain Malling walked home as he had come. But now it was deep in the night and his depression had deepened. He was a self-reliant man, and not easily felt himself small, though he was not conceited. To-night he felt diminished. The worm-sensation overcame him. That such a man as Chichester should have been able to convey to him such a sensation was strange, yet it was from Chichester that this mental chastisement had come. For a moment Chichester had towered, and at that moment Malling surely had dwindled, shrunk together, like a sheet of paper exposed to the heat of a flame.

But that Chichester should have had such an effect on him—Malling!

If Mr. Harding was going down the hill, Chichester surely was not. He had changed drastically since Malling had known him two years ago. In power, in force, he had gained. He now conveyed the impression of a man capable, if he chose, of imposing himself on others. Formerly he had been the wax that receives the impress. But whereas formerly he had been a contented man, obviously at peace with himself and with the world, now he was haunted by some great anxiety, by some strange grief, or perhaps even by some fear.

"Few men know how terrible the face of the truth can be."

Chichester had said that.

Was he one of the few men?

And was that why now, as Malling walked home in the darkness and rain, he felt himself humbled, diminished?

For Malling loved knowledge and thought men should live by it. Had truth a Medusa face, still would he have desired to look into it once, would have been ready to endure a subsequent turning to stone.

That Chichester should perhaps have seen what he had not seen—that troubled him, even humbled him.

Some words of Professor Stepton came back to his mind: “If there’s anything in it, development will take place in the link.” And those last words: “If in doubt, study Lady Sophia.”

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Malling was in doubt. Why not follow Stepton's advice? Why not study Lady Sophia?

He resolved to do it. And with the resolve came to him a sense of greater well-being. The worm-sensation departed from him. He lifted his head and walked more briskly.

V

On the night following the dinner in Hornton Street, Malling went to the Covent Garden Opera House to hear "La Traviata." The well-worn work did not grasp the attention of a man who was genuinely fond of the music of Richard Strauss, with its almost miraculous intricacies, and who was willingly captive to Debussy. He looked about the house from his stall, and very soon caught sight of Lady Mansford, Lady Sophia's sister-in-law, in a box on the Grand Tier. Malling knew Lady Mansford. He resolved to pay her a visit, and as soon as the curtain was down, and Tetrzzini had tripped before it, smiling not unlike a good-natured child, he made his way upstairs, and asked the attendant to tap at a door on which was printed, "The Earl of Mansford." The man did so, and opened the door, showing a domestic scene highly creditable to the much maligned British aristocracy—Lord Mansford seated alone with his wife, in evidently amicable conversation.

After a few polite words he made Malling sit down beside her, and, saying he would have a cigarette in the foyer, he left them together.

Lady Mansford was a pretty, dark woman, of the slightly irresponsible and little-bird type. She willingly turned her charmingly dressed head and chirped when noticed, and she was generally noticed because of her beauty. Now she chirped of Ceylon, where Malling had been, and then, more vivaciously, of Parisian milliners, where she had been. From these allied subjects Malling led her on to a slightly different topic—religion.

"I went to St. Joseph's last Sunday week," he presently said.

"St. who—what?" said Lady Mansford, who was busy with her opera-glasses, and had just noticed that Lady Sindon, a bird-like rival of hers, had changed the color of her hair, fortunately to her—Lady Sindon's—disadvantage.

"To St. Joseph's, to hear your brother-in-law preach."

"It doesn't do at all," murmured Lady Mansford. "It makes her look Chinese."

"You said—?"

"Mollie Sindon. But what were you talking about? Do tell me." She laid down her glasses.

“I was saying that I went to church last Sunday week.”

“Why?”

“To hear your brother-in-law preach at St. Joseph’s.”

“Marcus!” exclaimed Lady Mansford.

She pursed her lips.

“I don’t go to St. Joseph’s. Poor Sophy! I’m sorry for her.”

“I lunched with Lady Sophia after the service.”

“Did you? Isn’t it sad?”

“Sad! I don’t quite understand?” said Malling, interrogatively.

“The change in him. Of course people say it’s drink. Such nonsense! But they must say something, mustn’t they?”

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"Is Mr. Harding so very much changed?"

"Do you mean to say you didn't notice it?"

"I never met him till within the last fortnight."

"He's transformed—simply. He might have risen to anything, with his energy, his ambition, and his connections. And now! But the worst of it is no one can make out why it is. Even Sophia and Isinglass—my husband, you know!—haven't an idea. And it gets worse every day. Last Sunday I hear his sermon was too awful, a mere muddle of adjectives, such as one hears in Hyde Park, I believe. I never liked Marcus particularly. I always thought him too autocratic, too determined to dominate. He had that poor little Mr. Chichester—his curate—completely under his thumb. Mr. Chichester couldn't call his soul his own. He worshiped Marcus. But now they say even he is beginning to think that his god is of clay. What can it be? Do you think Marcus is losing his mind?"

"Oh, I should hope not," returned Malling, vaguely. "Has it been going on long?"

"Oh, for quite a time. But it all seemed to come on gradually—as things *do*, you know! Poor Sophy has always adored him, and given way to him in everything. In her eyes all that he does is right. She never says a word, I believe, but she must be suffering the tortures of—you know! There's Winnie Rufford coming in! How astonishingly young she looks. Were you at the Huntingham's ball? Well—"

Lady Mansford twittered no more about the Harding menage. But Malling felt that his visit had not been fruitless.

After the opera he went to a party in Grosvenor Street where again he managed to produce talk of the Hardings. It seemed that Lady Mansford had not exaggerated very much. Among those who knew the Hardings a change in the rector of St. Joseph's had evidently been generally noticed. Malling took in to supper a Mrs. Armitage, a great friend of Lady Sophia's, and she made no secret of the fact that Lady Sophia was greatly distressed.

"I thought she would have been here to-night," Mrs. Armitage said. "But she isn't. I suppose she felt she couldn't face it. So many of his congregation are here, or so many who were in his congregation."

"The church was crammed to the doors last Sunday week when he preached," observed Malling.

"Was it? Curiosity, I suppose. It certainly can't have been the intellectual merit of the sermon. I heard it was quite deplorable. But last Sunday's, I was told, was worse still. No continuity at all, and the church not full. People say the curate, Mr. Chichester, who



often preaches in the evening, is making a great effect, completely cutting out his rector. And he used to be almost unbearably dull."

"Will you have a quail?"

"Please. You might give me two. My doctor says if I sit up late—thank you!"

"I've never heard Mr. Chichester preach," said Malling.

"He seems to have come on marvelously, to be quite another man."

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"Quite another man, does he?"

"Yes. It's very trying for the Hardings naturally. If it continues I think there will have to be a change. I don't think things can go on as they are. My friend Sophia won't be able to stand it."

"You mean—the contrast?"

"Between her husband and Mr. Chichester. She's very highly strung and quite worships her husband; though, between you and me, I think rather in the slave spirit. But some women are like that. They can't admire a man unless he beats them. Not that Mr. Harding ever dreamed of doing such a thing to Sophia, of course. But his will had to be law in everything. You know the type of man! It's scarcely my idea of what a clergyman should be. I think a man who professes to direct the souls of others should be more gentle and unselfish, especially to his wife. Another quail? Well, really, I think perhaps I will. They are so absurdly small this season, aren't they? There's scarcely anything on them."

So that minute fraction of the world that knew of the existence of the Hardings began to utter itself concerning them, and Malling was fortified in his original belief which he had expressed to Professor Stepton.

Among his many experiments made in connection with psychical research those which had interested him the most had been those in which the mystery of the human will had seemed to be deeply involved. Malling was essentially a psychologist. And man was to him the great mystery, because man contained surely something that belonged to, that was lent to, man, as it were, by another, the mind beyond, the *anima mundi*. When Malling drew mentally, or spiritually, very near to any man, however rude, however humble, he always had the feeling that he was approaching holy ground. Hidden beneath his generally imperturbable exterior, sunk beneath the surface incredulity of his mind, there was the deep sense of mighty truths waiting the appointed day of proclamation. Surely, he often thought, if there is God in anything, in the last rays of the sunset, in the silence of night upon the sea, in the waking of spring among the forests and the gardens, in the song of the nightingale which knows not lovers are listening, there is God in the will of man.

And when he made investigations into the action of will upon will, or of will—as it seemed—upon matter, he was held, as he was not held by the appearance of so-called spirit faces and spirit forms, even when he could not connect these with trickery which he knew how to expose. Perhaps, however, his incredulity in regard to these latter phenomena was incurable, though he did not know it. For he knew nearly all the devices of the charlatans. And when the so-called spirits came, the medium was always entranced, that is, apparently will-less, and so to Malling not interesting.

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Now, from what Harding and Chichester had said to him, and from what he had observed for himself, Malling believed that the two clergymen must have had sittings together, probably with the usual tremendous object of the ignorant amateur, that merely of communicating with the other world. Considering who the two men were, Malling believed that in all probability they had sat alone and in secret. He also felt little doubt that from Mr. Harding's brain had come the suggestion of these practices, that his will had led Chichester on to them. Although he had not known the rector two years ago, he had gathered sufficient testimony to the fact that he had been a man of powerful, even perhaps of tyrannical, temperament, formed rather to rule than to be ruled. He knew that Chichester, on the contrary, had been gentle, kindly, yielding, and of somewhat weak, though of very amiable, nature. The physique of the two men accorded with these former temperaments. Harding's commanding height, large frame, big, powerful face and head, rather hard gray eyes, even his large white teeth, his bony, determined hands, his firmly treading feet, suggested force, a dominating will, the capacity, and the intention, to rule. Henry Chichester's fleshly envelop, on the other hand, cherubic, fair, and delicate, his blue eyes, small bones, the shape of forehead and chin, the line of the lips, hinted at—surely more than that, surely stated mildly—the existence within it of a nature retiring, meek, and ready to be ruled by others. No wonder if Chichester had been, as Lady Mansford had said, completely under the rector's thumb, no wonder if he had been unable to “call his soul his own” and had “worshiped Marcus.”

Yes, if there had been these secret sittings by these two men, it was Harding who had persuaded Chichester to take part in them. And what had these sittings led to, what had been their result?

The ignorant outsider, the hastily skeptical, of course would say that there could have been no result. Malling, knowing more, knew better. He had seen strange cases of temporary confusion of a man's will brought about by sittings, of what had seemed temporary change even of a man's nature. When a hitherto sane man goes mad he often becomes the opposite of what he was. Those whom he formerly loved he specially singles out for hatred. That which he delighted to do he shrinks from with horror. Once good-natured, he is now of an evil temper, once gentle, he is fiercely obstinate, once gay, he cowers and weeps. So Malling had known a man, while retaining his sanity, to be transformed by the apparently trivial fact of sitting at a table with a friend, and placing his hands upon it with the hands of another man. He himself had sat with an Oxford friend,—who in later sittings became entranced,—and at the very first experiment this man had said to him, “It's so strange, now that I am sitting with you like this I feel filled with hatred toward you.” This hatred, which had come upon this man at every successive sitting, had always faded away when the sitting was over. But was it certain that the feelings generated in sittings never persisted after they were broken up? Was it certain that in every case the waters that had been mysteriously troubled settled into their former stillness?

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Harding and Chichester, for instance! Had the strong man troubled the waters of the weaker man's soul, and were those waters still agitated? That was perhaps possible. But Malling thought it was possible also, and he had suggested this to Professor Stepton, that the weaker man had infused some of his weakness, his self-doubtings, his readiness to be affected by the opinion of others, into his dominating companion. Malling believed it possible that the wills of the two clergymen, in some mysterious and inexplicable way, had mingled during their sittings, and that they had never become completely disentangled. If this were so, the result was a different Harding from the former Harding, and a different Henry Chichester from the former Henry Chichester.

What puzzled Malling, however, was the fact, if fact it were, that the difference in each man was not diminishing, but increasing.

Could they be continuing the sittings, if there had ever been sittings? All was surmise. As the professor had said, he, Malling, was perhaps deducing a good deal from very little. And yet was he? His instinct told him he was not. Yet there might no doubt be some ordinary cause for the change in Mr. Harding. Some vice, such as love of drink, or morphia, something that disintegrates a man, might have laid its claw upon him. That was possible. What seemed to Malling much more unaccountable was the extraordinary change in the direction of strength in Chichester. And the relations between the two men, if indeed the curate had once worshiped his rector, were mysteriously transformed. For now, was it not almost as if something of Harding in Chichester watched, criticized, Chichester in Harding?

But now—to study Lady Sophia! For if there was really anything in Malling's curious supposition, the woman must certainly be strangely affected. He remembered the expression in her eyes when her husband was preaching, her manner when she spoke of the curate as one of her husband's swans.

And he longed to see her again. She had said that she hoped he would come again to St. Joseph's and to her house, but he knew well that any such desire in her had arisen from her wounded pride in her husband. She wished Malling to know what the rector could really do. When she thought that the rector had recovered his former powers, his hold upon the minds of men, then she would invite Malling to return to St. Joseph's, but not before.

And when would that moment come?

It might not come for weeks, for months. It might never come. Malling did not mean to await it. Nevertheless he did not want to do anything likely to surprise Lady Sophia, to lead her to think that he had any special object in view in furthering his acquaintance with her.

While he was casting about in his mind what course to take, chance favored him.

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Four days later, when he was strolling round the rooms in Burlington House, he saw not far in front of him the tall and restless figure of a woman. She was alone. For some time Malling did not recognize her. She did not turn sufficiently for him to see her face, and her almost feverish movements, though they attracted and fixed his attention, did not strike him as familiar. His thought of her, as he slowly followed in the direction she was taking, was, "What a difficult woman that would be to live with!" For the hands were never still; the gait was uneasy; nervousness, almost a sort of pitiful irritation, seemed expressed by her every movement.

In the big room this woman paused before the picture of the year, which happened to be a very bad one, and Malling, coming up, at last recognized her as Lady Sophia Harding.

He took off his hat. She seemed startled, but greeted him pleasantly, and entered into a discussion of the demerits which fascinate the crowd.

"You prefer seeing pictures alone, perhaps?" said Malling, presently.

"Indeed I don't," she answered. "I was coming to-day with my husband. We drove up together. But at the last moment he thought he remembered something,—some appointment with Mr. Chichester,—and left me."

There were irony and bitterness in her voice.

"He said he'd come back and meet me in the tea-room presently," she added.

"Shall we go there and wait for him?" asked Malling.

"But I'm afraid I'm taking up your time."

"I have no engagements this afternoon. I shall enjoy a quiet talk with you."

"It's very good of you."

They descended, and sat down in a quiet corner. In the distance a few respectable persons were slowly eating bath-buns with an air of fashion, their duly marked catalogues laid beside them on marble.

Far-off waiters, standing with their knees bent, conversed in undertones. A sort of subterranean depression, peculiar to this fastness of Burlington House, brooded over the china and the provisions.

"It reminds me of the British Museum tearoom," said Lady Sophia. "Here is tea! What a mercy! Modern pictures sap one's little strength."

She looked haggard, and was obviously on the edge of her nerves.

“Marcus might have come in,” she added. “But of course he wouldn’t—or couldn’t.”

“Doesn’t he care for pictures?”

She slightly shrugged her shoulders.

“He used to. But I don’t know that he does now.”

“I suppose he has a tremendous amount to do.”

“He used to do much more at Liverpool. If a man wishes to come to the front he mustn’t sit in an armchair with folded hands.”

There was a sharp sound of criticism in her voice which astonished Malling. At the luncheon, only about a fortnight ago, she had shown herself plainly as the adoring wife, anxious for her husband’s success, nervously hostile to any one who interfered with it, who stood between him and the homage of his world. Now Malling noted, or thought he noted, a change in her mental attitude. He was instantly on the alert.

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"I'm sure that's the last thing Mr. Harding would do," he said.

She shot a glance at him out of her discontented dark eyes.

"Are you?" she said.

And sarcasm crept in the words. She gave to Malling at this moment the impression of a woman so strung up as to be not her natural self, so tormented by some feeling, perhaps long repressed, that her temperament was almost furiously seeking an outlet, knowing instinctively, perhaps, that only there lay its salvation.

"His record proves it," said Malling, with serenely smiling assurance.

Lady Sophia twisted her lips. The Academy tea was very strong. Perhaps it had been standing. She drank a little, pulled at her long gloves restlessly, and looked at Malling. He knew she was longing to confide in somebody. If only he could induce her to confide in him!

"Oh, my husband's been a very active man," she said. "Everybody knows that. But in this modern world of ours one must not walk, or even run along, one must keep on rushing along if one intends to reach the goal."

"And by that you mean—?"

"Mean! The topmost height of your profession, or business, of whatever career you are in."

"You are ambitious," he said.

"Not for myself," she answered quickly. "I have no ambition for myself."

"But perhaps the ambition to spur on another successfully? That seems to me the truest, the most legitimate ambition of the woman all men worship in their hearts."

Suddenly tears started into her eyes. She was sitting opposite Malling, the tea-table between them. Now she leaned forward across it. By nature she was very sensitive, but she was not a self-conscious, woman. She was not self-conscious now.

"It is much better to be selfish," she said earnestly. "That is where we women make such a fatal mistake. Instead of trusting to ourselves, of relying on ourselves, and of having a personal ambition, we seek always another in whom we may trust; we are unhappy till we rely on another; it is for another we cherish, we hug, ambition. And then, when all founders, we realize too late what I dare say every man knows."

"What is that?"

"That we women are fools—fools!"

"For being unselfish?"

"For thinking we have power when we are impotent."

She made a gesture that was surely one of despair.

"No one—at any rate, no woman—has power for another," she added, with almost terrible conviction. "That is all a legend, made up to please us, I suppose. We draw a sword against darkness and think we are fighting. Isn't it too absurd?"

With the last words she changed her tone, trying to make it light, and she smiled.

"We take everything too seriously. That's the trouble!" she said. "And men pretend we take nothing seriously."

"Very often they don't understand."

"Oh, please say never!" she exclaimed. "They never understand."

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Suddenly Malling resolved on a very bold stroke.

"But I'm a man," he said, as if that obvious fact shattered her contention.

"What has that got to do with it?" she said, in obvious surprise.

"Because I do not understand."

For a moment she was silent. He thought he read what was passing through her mind, as he knew he had read her character. She was one of those women who must be proud of their men, who love to be ruled, but only by a conqueror, who delight to sink themselves, but in power, not in impotence. And now she was confronted by the shipwreck not merely of her hopes, but also of her belief. She saw a hulk drifting at the mercy of the waves that, perhaps, would soon engulf it. But she was not only despairing, she was raging too. For she was a woman with nervous force in her, and it is force that rages in the moments of despair, seeking, perhaps unconsciously, some means of action and finding none.

"Why should there not be some hope?" asked Malling, quietly.

"To-morrow is Sunday. If you go to morning church at St. Joseph's, and then to evening church, you will see if there is any hope."

"To evening church?"

"Yes, yes."

She got up.

"You are going?"

"I must. Forgive me!"

She held out her hand.

"But—"

"No, don't come with me, please."

"If I go to St. Joseph's to-morrow, afterward may I see you again?"

"If you think it's worth while."

Her face twisted. Hastily she pulled down her veil, turned away and left him.

VI

Malling went the next day to morning and evening service at St. Joseph's. He was not invited to lunch in Onslow Gardens, and he did not see Lady Sophia. On the whole, he was glad of this. He had enough to keep in his mind that day. The matter in which he was interested seemed growing before his eyes, like a thing coming out of the earth, but now beginning to thrust itself up into regions where perhaps it would eventually be hidden in darkness, with the great company of mysteries whose unraveling is beyond the capacity of man.

He had now, he felt sure, a clear comprehension of Lady Sophia. Their short interview at Burlington House had been illuminating. She was a typical example of the Adam's-rib woman; that is, of the woman who, intensely, almost exaggeratedly feminine, can live in any fullness only through another, and that other a man. Through Mr. Harding Lady Sophia had hitherto lived, and had doubtless, in her view, triumphed. Obviously a woman not free from a nervous vanity, and a woman of hungry ambition, her vanity and ambition had been fed by his growing notoriety, his increasing success and influence. The rib had thrilled with the body to which it belonged.

But that time of happy emotion, of admiration, of keen looking forward, was the property of the past. Lawn sleeves, purple, perhaps,—for who is more hopeful than this type of woman in the golden moments of life?—perhaps even an archiepiscopal throne faded from before the eyes they had gladdened—the eyes of faith in a man.

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And a different woman was beginning to appear—a woman who might be as critical as she had formerly been admiring, a woman capable of becoming embittered.

On the Sunday of Mallings's visit to Onslow Gardens, Mr. Harding's failure in the pulpit had waked up in his wife eager sympathy and eager spite, the one directed toward the man who had failed, the other toward the man who, as Mallings felt sure, had caused the failure.

In Burlington House that woman, whom men with every reason adore, had given place to another less favorable toward him who had been her hero.

It seemed to Mallings as if in the future a strange thing might happen, almost as if it must happen: it seemed to him as if Chichester might convey his view of his rector to his rector's wife.

"Study the link," Stepton had said. "There will be development in the link."

Already the words had proved true. There had been a development in Lady Sophia such as Mallings had certainly not anticipated. Where would it end? Again and again, as he listened to the morning and evening sermons, Mallings had asked himself that question; again and again he had recalled his conversation at Burlington House with Lady Sophia.

In the morning at St. Joseph's Mr. Harding had preached to a church that was half filled; in the evening Henry Chichester had preached to a church that was full to the doors. And each of the clergymen in turn had listened to the other, but how differently!

Mr. Harding had ascended to the pulpit with failure staring him in the face, and whereas on the Sunday when Mallings first heard him he had obviously fought against the malign influence which eventually had prevailed over him, this time he had not had the vigor to make a struggle. Certainly he had not broken down. It might be said of him, as it was once said of a nation, that he had "muddled through." He had preached a very poor sermon in a very poor way, nervously, indeed, almost timidly, and with the manner of a man who was cowed and hopeless. The powerful optimism for which he had once been distinguished had given way to an almost unhealthy pessimism, alien surely to the minds of all believers, of all who profess to look forward to that life of which, as Tolstoi long ago said, our present life is but a dream. Even when he was uttering truths he spoke them as if he had an uneasy suspicion that they were lies. At moments he seemed to be almost pleading with his hearers to tolerate him, to "bear with him." Indeed, several times during his disjointed remarks he made use of the latter expression, promising that his discourse should be a short one. Very carefully he included himself among those aware of sin, very humbly he declared the unworthiness of any man to set himself up as a teacher and leader of others.



Now, humility is all very well, but if carried to excess, it suggests something less than a man. Mr. Harding almost cringed before his congregation. Malling did not feel that his humility was a pretense. On the contrary, it struck him as abominably real, but so excessive as to be not natural in any thorough man in a normal condition of mind and of body. It was the sort of humility that creates in the unregenerate a desire to offer a good kicking as a corrective.

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Very different was the effect created by Chichester's sermon in the evening. Malling, aware though he had become of the great strengthening of Chichester, was amazed when he heard him preach.

Often it is said of a very fine preacher that he preached as one inspired. Chichester preached as one who knew. Never before had Malling been so impressed with the feeling that he was listening to truth, absolute truth, as he was while he listened to Chichester. There was something, though, that was almost deadly about it. It pierced like a lancet. It seared like a red-hot iron. It humbled almost too much. Here was no exaggerated humility, no pleading to be borne with, no cringing, and no doubt. A man who knew was standing up, and, with a sort of indifference to outside opinion that was almost frightening, was saying some of the things he knew about men, women—and surely God!

The subject was somewhat akin to that of the first sermon of Mr. Harding which Malling had heard. The rector then had preached on self-knowledge. The curate, now, preached on hypocrisy. Incidentally he destroyed his rector's sermon, flung it away on the scrap-heap, and passed on. This was not done viciously, but it was done relentlessly. Indeed, that was the note of the whole sermon. It was relentless, as truth is relentless, as death is relentless. And besides being terribly true, it was imaginative. But the preacher almost succeeded in conveying the impression to his congregation that what is generally called imagination is really vision, that the true imagination is seeing what is, but is often hidden, knowing what is, but is often unknown. The latter part of the sermon struck Malling as very unusual, even as very daring.

The preacher had spoken of the many varieties of hypocrisy. Finally he drew a picture of a finished hypocrite. And the man lived as a man lives in the pages of a great writer. One could walk round him, one knew him. And then Chichester treated him as the writer treats his creation; he proceeded to show his hypocrite in action.

The man, happy, almost triumphant,—for he now often looked upon himself with the eyes of others who knew him not,—was walking to his home on a winter's evening along a country road, passing now and then rustics who respectfully saluted him, neighbors who grasped his hand, children who innocently smiled at him, women who whispered that he was a fine fellow, the clergyman of his parish, who gave him God-speed upon his way as to one who deserved that God should speed him because his way was right. Snow was upon the ground. Such light as there was began to fade. It was evident that the night, which was very still, was going to be very dark. And the man stepped out briskly. Presently, at a lonely part of the road, happening to look down, he saw footprints in the freshly fallen snow. They were of feet that had recently passed on the way he was following. They had attracted, they continued to attract, his attention, he knew not why. And as he went on, his eyes were often upon them.

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Presently he began to wonder about the feet which had made the prints he saw. Did they belong to a man or a woman? The prints were too large to have been made by the feet of a child. He gazed at them searchingly, and made up his mind that it was a man who had recently trodden this road. And what sort of man was it that thus preceded him not very far away? He became deeply engrossed with this question. His mind revolved about this unknown traveler, floating forward in surmises, till, by chance, he happened to set his right foot in one of the prints left in the snow. His foot exactly filled it. This fact, he knew not why, startled him. He stopped, bent down, examined the snow closely, measured very carefully his feet with the prints before him, now rather faintly discerned in the gathering darkness. The prints might have been made by his own feet. Having ascertained this, and reflected for a moment, he went forward, now assailed by a growing curiosity as to the personality and character of the stranger. But perhaps he was not a stranger. He might surely well be a neighbor, an acquaintance, perhaps even a friend. The man meant, if possible, to come up with him, whoever he was, and he now hurried along with the intention of joining the unknown whose footprints were the same as his own.

At this point in his sermon Chichester paused for a moment. And Malling, who seldom felt any thrill at a seance, and who had often remained calmly watchful and alert during manifestations which amazed or terrified others, was aware of a feeling of cold, which seemed to pass like a breath through his spirit. The congregation about him, perhaps struck by the unusual form of the sermon, remained silent and motionless, waiting. In his stall sat the rector with downcast eyes. Malling could not at that moment discern his expression. His large figure and important powerful head and face showed almost like those of a carved effigy in the lowered light of the chancel. The choirboys did not stir, and the small, fair man in the pulpit, raising his thin hands, and resting them on the marble ledge, continued quietly, taking up his sermon with a repetition of the last words uttered, "whose footprints were the same as his own."

Again the cold breath went through Malling's spirit. He leaned slightly forward and gazed at Chichester.

For some time the man thus went onward, following the footprints in the snow, but not overtaking any one, and becoming momentarily more eager to satisfy his curiosity. Then, on a sudden, he started, stopped, and listened. It had now become very dark, and in this darkness, and the great stillness of night, he heard the faint sound of a footfall before him, brushing through the crisp snow, which lay lightly, and not very deep, on the hard highroad leading to the village on the farther outskirts of which his house was situated. He could not yet see any one, but he felt sure that the person who made this faint sound was no other than he in whose steps he had been treading. It would now be a matter of only a minute or two to come up with him. And the man went on, but more slowly, whether because he was now certain of attaining his object or for some other reason.

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The sound of the footfall persisted, and was certainly not far off. The prints in the snow were so fresh that they seemed not quite motionless, as if the snow were only now settling after the pressure it had just suffered. The man slackened his pace. He did not like the sound which he heard. He began to feel as if he by whom it was made would not prove a companion to his taste. Yet his curiosity continued. There began within him a struggle between his curiosity and another sensation, which was of repugnance, almost of fear. And so equal were the combatants that the lights of the village were in sight, and he had not decreased the distance between himself and the other. Seeing the lights, however, his curiosity got the upper hand. He slightly quickened his pace, and almost immediately beheld the shape of a man relieved against the night, and treading onward through the snow. And as the sound of the footsteps had been disagreeable to his nerves, so the contours of the moving blackness repelled him. He did not like the look of this man whose footprints were the same as his own, and he decided not to join him. But, moving rather cautiously, he gained a little upon him, in order to make sure, if possible, whether or not he was a neighbor or an acquaintance.

The figure seemed somehow familiar to our man, indeed, oddly familiar. Nevertheless, he was unable to identify it. As he followed it, more and more certain did he become that he had seen it, that he knew it. And yet—did he know it? Had he seen it? It was almost as if one part of him denied while the other affirmed. He longed, yet feared, to see the face. But the face never looked back. And so, one at a little distance behind the other, they came into the village.

Here a strange thing occurred.

There were very few people about, but there were a few, and two or three of them, meeting the person our man was following, greeted him respectfully. But these same people, when immediately afterward they encountered the other, who had known them for years, and whom they of course knew, showed the greatest perturbation; one, a woman, even signs of terror. They gave him no greeting, shrank from him as he passed, and stared after him, as if bemused, when he was gone by. Their behavior was almost incredible. But he was so set on what was before him that he stopped to ask no questions.

The village was a long one. Always one behind the other, walking at an even pace, the two men traversed it, approaching at last the outskirts, where, separated from the other habitations, and surrounded by a garden in which the trees were laden with snow, stood the house of the man who now watched and followed, with a growing wonder and curiosity, combined with an ever-growing repugnance, him who made the footprints, who had been saluted by the villagers, whose figure and general aspect seemed in somewise familiar to him, and yet whom he could not recognize. Where could this person be going? The man asked himself, and came to a resolve not to follow on into the darkness of the open country, not to proceed beyond his own home, of which now

he saw the lights, but to make an effort to see the face of the other before the garden gate was reached.

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In this attempt, however, he was destined to be frustrated. For as he determinedly quickened his steps, so did the other, who gained the gate of the garden, unlatched it, turned in, and walked on among the trees going toward the principal door.

A visitor, then! The man paused by his garden gate, whence he could see his house front, with the light from the window of his own sitting-room streaming over the porch. The stranger stood before it, made a movement as if searching in his pocket, drew out his hand, lifted it. The door opened at once. He disappeared within, and the door closed after him.

He had opened the door with a key.

The man at the gate felt overcome by a sensation almost of horror, which he could not explain to himself. It was not that he was horrified by the certainly extraordinary fact of some one possessing a key to his house, and using it in this familiar fashion. It was not even that he was horrified at seeing a man, perhaps a stranger, disappearing thus into his home by night, uninvited, unexpected. What horrified him was that this particular man, whose footprints he had followed and measured with his foot, whose footfalls he had heard, whose form he had seen outlined against the night, should be within his house, where his wife and his children were, and where his venerable mother was sitting beside the fire. That this man should be there! He knew now that from the first moment when he had been aware of his existence he had hated him, that his subconscious mind had hated him.

But who was he? The natural thing would have been to follow quickly into the house, to see who had entered, to demand an explanation. But he could not do this. Why? He himself did not know why. But he knew that he dared not do this. And he waited, expecting he knew not what; a cry, a summons, perhaps, some manifestation that would force him to approach.

None came. Steadily the lights shone from the house. There was no sound but the soft fall of a block of snow from an overlaiden fir branch in the garden. The man began to marvel. Who could this be whose familiar entry into his—*his* home thus at night caused no disturbance? There were dogs within: they had not barked. There were servants: apparently they had not stirred. It was almost as if this stranger's permanence was accepted by the household. A long, long time had slipped by.

The man at length, making an almost fierce effort, partly dominated the unreasoning sense of horror which possessed him. He opened the gate, stepped into the garden, and made his way slowly and softly toward the house door. But suddenly he stopped. Through the unshuttered window of his sitting-room, the room in which for years he had spent much of his time, in which he had concocted many schemes to throw dust in the eyes of his neighbors, and even of his own relatives, in which he had learned very perfectly to seem what he was not, and to hide what he really was, he perceived the

figure of a man. It crossed the lighted space slowly, and disappeared with a downward movement. He knew it was the man he had been following and whom he had seen enter his house.

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For a long while he remained where he was on the path of the garden. The night deepened about him. A long way off, at the other end of the village, a clock chimed the hours. In the cottages the lights were extinguished. The few loungers disappeared from the one long street vanishing over the snow. And the man never moved. A numb terror possessed him. Yet, despite his many faults and his life of evil, he had never been physically a coward. Always the light shone steadily from the window of his study, making a patch of yellow upon the snow. Always the occupant of the room must be seated tranquilly there, like an owner. For no figure had risen, had repassed across the unshuttered space.

The man told himself again and again that he must go forward till he gained the window, that he must at least look into the room; if he dared not enter the house to confront the intruder, to demand an explanation. But again and again something within him, which seemed to be a voice from the innermost chamber of his soul, whispered to him not to go, whispered to him to leave the intruder alone, to let the intruder do what he would, but not to approach him, above all, not to look upon his face. And the man obeyed the voice till a thing happened which roused in him a powerful beast, called by many the natural man.

He saw his wife, whom he loved in his way, though he had tricked and deceived her again and again, cross the window space, smiling, and disappear with a downward movement, as the other had disappeared. Then she rose into his range of vision, and stood for a moment so that he could see her clearly, smiling, talking, making little gestures that he knew, carrying her hand to her face, stretching it out, dropping it. Finally she lifted it to her lips, half-closing her eyes at the same time, took it away quickly, with a sort of butterfly motion, and vanished, going toward the left, where the room door was.

So had she many and many a time bidden him, her husband, good night. Instantly, with an impulse which seemed combined of rage and terror, both now full of a driving force which was irresistible, the man sprang forward to the window, seized the stone coping with his hands and stared into his room.

Seated in a round chair at his writing-table, by a lamp with a green shade, was the man who had entered his house. He was writing busily in a book with a silver clasp that could be locked with a key, and he leaned a little over the table with his head turned away. The shape of his head, his posture, even the manner in which he used his pen as he traced line after line in the book, made an abominable impression upon the man staring in at the window. But the face—the face! He must see that! And he leaned forward, trembling, but fiercely, and, pressing his own face against the pane, he looked at the occupant of his room as men look sometimes with their souls.

The man at the table lifted his head. He laid down the pen, blotted the book in which he had been writing, shut it up, clasped it, locked it with a tiny key, and put it carefully into a

drawer of the table, which also he locked. He got up, stood for an instant by the table with one hand upon it, then turned slowly toward the window, smiling, as men smile to themselves when they are thinking of their own ingenuities.

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The man outside the window fell back into the snow as if God's hand had touched him. He had seen his own face! So he smiled sometimes at the end of a day, when he had finished writing down in his diary some of the hidden things of his life.

He turned, and as the window through which he had been looking suddenly darkened, he fled away into the night.

When the lights, which at St. Joseph's were always kept lowered during the sermon, once more strongly illuminated the chancel, Mr. Harding turned a ghastly face toward the pulpit. In the morning Chichester had listened to him, as a man of truth might listen to a man who is trying to lie, but who cannot deceive him. In the evening Mr. Harding had listened to Chichester—how? What had been the emotions only shadowed faintly forth in that ghastly face?

When Malling got home, he asked himself why Chichester had made such an impression upon his mind. His story of the double, strange enough, no doubt, in a sermon, could not surely have come upon Malling with any of the force and the interest of the new. For years he had been familiar with tales of ghosts, of voices, of appearances at the hour of death, of doubles. Of course in the sermon there had been a special application of the story. It had been very short. Chichester had suggested that if, as by a miracle, the average self-contented man could look at himself with the eyes of his soul full of subliminal self-knowledge and with the bodily eyes, he would be stricken down by a great horror.

And he had spoken as a man who knew. Indeed, it seemed to Malling that he had spoken as might have delivered himself the man who had followed his double through the snow, who had looked in upon him by night from the garden, if he had faced, instead of flying from, the truth; if he had stayed, if he had persistently watched his double leading the life he had led, if he had learned a great lesson that perhaps only his double could teach him.

But if the man had stayed, what would have been the effect on the double? Malling sat till deep in the night pondering these things.

VII

Lady Sophia had said to Malling that if he went to the two services at St. Joseph's on the Sunday she would invite him to see her again. She was as good as her word. In the middle of the week he received a note from her, saying she would be at home at four on Thursday, if he was able to come. He went, and found her alone. But as soon as he entered the drawing-room and had taken her hand, she said:

"I am expecting Mr. Chichester almost immediately. He's coming to tea."

"I shall be glad to meet him," said Malling, concealing his surprise, which was great.

Yet he did not know why it should be. For what more natural than that Chichester should be coming?

"I heard of you at St. Joseph's," Lady Sophia continued. "A friend of mine, Lily Armitage, saw you there. I didn't. I was sitting at the back. I have taken to sitting quite at the back of the church. What did you think of it?"

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"Do you wish me to be frank, and do you mean the two sermons?"

She hesitated for an instant. Then she said:

"I do mean the sermons, and I do wish you to be frank."

"I thought Mr. Chichester's sermon very remarkable indeed."

"And my husband's sermon?"

Her lips twisted almost as if with contempt when she said the words, "my husband's."

"Why doesn't Mr. Harding take a long rest?" said Malling, speaking conventionally, a thing that he seldom did.

"You think he needs one?"

"He has a tiresome malady, I understand."

"What malady?"

"Doesn't he suffer very much from nervous dyspepsia?"

She looked at him with irony, which changed almost instantly into serious reflection. But the irony returned.

"Now and then he has a touch of it," she said. "Very few of us don't have something. But we have to go on, and we do go on, nevertheless."

"I think a wise doctor would probably order your husband away," said Malling, though Mr. Harding's departure was the last thing he desired just then.

"Even if he were ordered away, I don't know that he would go."

"Why not?"

"I don't think he would. I don't feel as if he could get away," she said, with what seemed to Malling a sort of odd obstinacy. "In fact, I know he's not going," she abruptly added. "I have an instinct."

Malling felt sure that she had considered, perhaps long before he had suggested it, this very project of Mr. Harding's departure for a while for rest, and that she had rejected it. Her words recalled to his mind some other words of her husband, spoken in Mr. Harding's study: "Surely one ought to get out of such an atmosphere, to get out of it, and to keep out of it. But how extraordinary it is the difficulty men have in getting away from things!"

Perhaps Lady Sophia was right. Perhaps the rector could not get away from the atmosphere which seemed to be destroying him.

"I dare say he is afraid to trust everything to his curates," observed Malling, prosaically.

"He needn't be—now," she replied.

In that "now," as she said it, there lay surely a whole history. Malling understood that Lady Sophia, suddenly perhaps, had given her husband up. Since Malling had first encountered her she had cried, "*Le roi est mort!*" in her heart. The way she had just uttered the word "now" made Malling wonder whether she was not about to utter the supplementary cry, "*Vive le roi!*"

As he looked at her, with this wonder in his mind, Henry Chichester came into the room.

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There was an expression of profound sadness on his face, which seemed to dignify it, to make it more powerful, more manly, than it had been. The choir-boy look was gone. Malling of course knew how very much expression can change a human being; nevertheless, he was startled by the alteration in the curate's outward man. It seemed, to use the rector's phrase, that he had "shed his character." And now, perhaps, the new character, mysteriously using matter as the vehicle of its manifestation, was beginning to appear to the eyes of men. He showed no surprise at the sight of Malling, but rather a faint, though definite, pleasure. The way in which Lady Sophia greeted him was a revelation to Malling, and a curious exhibition of feminine psychology.

She looked up at him from the low chair in which she was sitting, gave him her left hand, and said, "Are you very tired?" That was all. Yet it would have been impossible to express more clearly a woman's mental, not affectional, subjugation by a man, her instinctive yielding to power, her respect for authority, her recognition that the master of her master had come into the room.

Her "*Vive le roi!*" was said.

Chichester accepted Lady Sophia's subtle homage with an air of unconsciousness. His interior melancholy seemed to lift him above the small things that flatter small men. He acknowledged that he was tired, and would be glad of tea. He had been down in the East End. The rector had asked him to talk over something with Mr. Carlile of the Church Army.

"You mean that you suggested to the rector that it would be wise to see Mr. Carlile," said Lady Sophia.

"Is the rector coming in to tea?" asked Chichester.

"Possibly he may," she replied. "He knew Mr. Malling was to be here. Did you tell him you were coming?"

"No. I was not certain I should get away in time."

"I think he will probably turn up."

A footman brought in tea at this moment, and Malling told the curate he had heard him preach in the evening of last Sunday.

"It was a deeply interesting sermon," he said.

"Thank you," said Chichester, very impersonally.

The footman went away, and Lady Sophia began to make tea.

“When I went home,” Malling continued, “I sat up till late thinking it over. Part of it suggested to my mind one or two rather curious speculations.”

“Which part?” asked Lady Sophia, dipping a spoon into a silver tea-caddy.

“The part about the man and his double.”

She shivered, and some of the tea with which she had just filled the spoon was shaken out of it.

“That was terrible,” she said.

“What were your speculations?” said Chichester, showing a sudden and definite waking up of keen interest.

“One of them was this—”

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Before he could continue, the door opened again, and the tall and powerful form of the rector appeared. And as the outer man of Chichester seemed to Malling to have begun subtly to change, in obedience surely to the change of his inner man, so seemed Mr. Harding a little altered physically, as he now slowly came forward to greet his wife's two visitors. The power of his physique seemed to be struck at by something within, and to be slightly marred. One saw that largeness can become but a wide surface for the tragic exhibition of weakness. As the rector perceived the presence of Chichester, an expression of startled pain fled over his face and was gone in an instant. He greeted the two men and sat down.

"Have you just begun tea?" he asked, looking now at his wife.

"We are just going to begin it," she replied. "We are talking about the sermon of last Sunday."

"Oh," rejoined the rector.

He turned to Malling.

"Did you come to hear me preach again?"

There was a note as of slight reassurance in his voice.

"Mr. Chichester's sermon," said Lady Sophia.

"Oh, I see," said the rector. He glanced hastily from one to the other of the three people in the room, like a man searching for sympathy or help. "What were you saying about our friend Chichester's sermon?" he asked, with a forced air of interest.

Lady Sophia distributed cups for tea.

"I was speaking of that part of it which dealt with the man who followed his double," said Malling.

"Ah?" said the rector.

He was holding his tea-cup. His hand trembled slightly at this moment, and the china rattled. He set the cup down on the small table before him.

"You said," observed Chichester—toward whom Lady Sophia immediately turned, with an almost rapt air—"that it suggested some curious speculations to your mind. I should very much like to know what they were."

“One was this. Suppose the man in the garden, who looked in upon his double, had not fled away. Suppose he had had the courage to remain, and, in hiding—for the sake of argument we may assume the situation to be possible—”

“Ah, indeed! And why not?” interrupted Chichester.

His voice, profoundly melancholy, fell like a weight upon those who heard him. And again Malling thought of him almost as some one set apart from his fellows by some mysterious knowledge, some heavy burthen of truth.

“—and in hiding had watched the life of his double. I sat up speculating what effect such an observation, terrible no doubt and grotesque, would be likely to have on the soul of the watching man. But there was another speculation with which I entertained my mind that night.”

“Let us have it,” said Chichester, leaning forward, and, with the gesture characteristic of him, dropping his hands down between his knees. “Let us have it.”

“Suppose the man to remain and, in hiding, to watch the life of his double, what effect would such an observation be likely to have upon the double?”

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Malling paused. The rector, with an almost violent movement of his big hand and arm, took his cup from the table and drank his tea.

"It didn't occur to you, I suppose, when composing your sermon to follow that train of thought?" said Malling to Chichester.

"No," replied the curate, slowly, and like one thinking profoundly. "I was too engrossed with the feelings of the man. But, then, you thought of the double as a living man, with all the sensations of a man?"

"That was your fault," said Malling.

"His fault!" said Lady Sophia, with a sort of latent sharpness, and laying an emphasis on the second word.

"Certainly; for making the narrative so vital and human."

He addressed himself again to the curate.

"Did you not give to the double the attributes of a man? Did you not make his wife come to bid him good night, bend down to kiss him, waft him a characteristic farewell?"

"It is true. I did," said Chichester, still speaking like a man in deep thought.

"That was the most terrible part of all," said Lady Sophia. In her voice there was an accent almost of horror. "It sickened me to the soul," she continued—"the idea of a woman bidding a tender good night to an apparition."

"I took it as a man," said Malling.

They had all three, strangely, left the rector out of this discussion, and he seemed willing that it should be so. He now sat back in his chair listening to all that was being said, somewhat as he had listened to the sermon of Chichester, in a sort of ghastly silence.

"How could a man's double be a man?" said Lady Sophia.

"We are in the region of assumption and of speculation," returned Malling, quietly, "a not uninteresting region either, I think. The other night for a whole hour, having assumed the double man, I speculated on his existence, spied upon by his other self. And you never did that?"

He looked at Chichester.

"When I was making my sermon I was engrossed by the thought of the watching man."

Malling's idea had evidently laid a grip upon Chichester's mind.

"Tell me what the double's existence would be, according to you," he said. "Tell me."

"You imagined the lesson learnt by the man so terrible that he fled away into the night."

"Yes."

"Had he been strong enough to stay—"

"Strong enough!" interposed Chichester. "Better say, had he been obliged to stay."

"Very well. Given that compulsion, in my imagination the double must have learnt a lesson, too. If we can learn by contemplation, can we not, must we not, learn by being contemplated? Life is permeated by reciprocity. I can imagine another sermon growing out of yours of last Sunday."

"Yes, you are right—you are right," said Chichester.

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"The double, then, in my imagination, would gradually become uneasy under this secret observation. You described him as, his wife gone, sitting down comfortably to write some account of the hidden doings of his life, as, the writing finished, the diary committed to the drawer and safely locked away, rising up to go to rest with a smile of self-satisfaction. It seemed to me that, given my circumstance of the persistent observation, a few nights later matters would have been very different within that room. The hypocrite is happy, if he is happy at all, when he is convinced that his hypocrisy is successful. Take away that certainty, and he would be invaded by anxiety. Set any one to watch him closely, he would certainly suffer, if he knew it."

"If he knew it! That is the point," said Chichester. "You put the man watching the double in hiding."

"There are influences not yet fully understood which can traverse space, which can touch not as a hand touches, but as unmistakably. I imagined the soul of the double touched in this way, the waters troubled."

"Troubled! Troubled!"

It was Mr. Harding who had spoken, almost lamentably. His powerfully shaped head now drooped forward on his breast.

"I imagined," continued Malling, "a sort of gradual disintegration beginning, and proceeding, in the double—a disintegration of the soul, if such a thing can be conceived of."

His piercing eyes went from Chichester to Harding.

"Or, no," he corrected himself. "Perhaps that is an incorrect description of my—very imaginative—flight through speculation the other night. Possibly I should say a gradual transference, instead of disintegration of soul. For it seemed to me as if the man who watched might gradually, as it were, absorb into himself the soul of the double, but purified. For the watcher has the tremendous advantage of seeing the hypocrite living the hypocrite's life, while the hypocrite is only seen. Might not the former, therefore, conceivably draw in strength, while the other faded into weakness? Ignorance is the terrible thing in life, I think. Now the man who watched would receive knowledge, fearful knowledge, but the man who was watched, while perhaps suffering first uneasiness, then possibly even terror, would not, in my conception, ever clearly understand. He would not any longer dare at night to sit down alone to fill up that dreadful diary. He would not any longer perhaps—I only say perhaps—dare to commit the deeds the record of which in the past the diary held. But his lesson would be one of fear, making for weakness, finally almost for nothingness. And the other night I conceived of him at last fading away in the gloom of his room with the darkened window."

“That was your end!” said Mr. Harding, in a low voice.

“Yes, that was my end.”

“Then,” said Chichester, “you think the lesson men learn from being contemplated tends only to destroy them?”

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But Malling, now with a smiling change to greater lightness and ease, hastened to traverse this statement.

"No, no," he replied. "For the contemplation of a man by his fellow-men must always be an utterly different thing from his own contemplation by himself. For our fellow-men always remain in a very delightful ignorance of us. Don't they, Lady Sophia? And so they can never destroy us, luckily for us."

He had done what he wished to do, and he was now ready for other activities. But he found it was not easy to switch his companions off onto another trail. Lady Sophia, now that he looked at her closely, he saw to be under the influence of fear, provoked doubtless by the subject they had been discussing. Chichester, also, had a look as of fear in his eyes. As to the rector, he sat gazing at his curate, and there had come upon his countenance an expression of almost unnatural resolution, such as a coward's might wear if terror forced him into defiance.

In reply to Malling's half-laughing question, Lady Sophia said:

"You've studied all these things, haven't you?"

"Do you mean what are sometimes called occult questions?"

"Yes."

"I have."

"And do you believe in them?"

"I'm afraid I must ask you to be a little more definite."

"Do you believe that there are such things as doubles?"

"I have no reason to believe that there are, unless you include wrongly in the term the merely physical replica. It appears to be established that now and then two human beings are born who, throughout their respective lives remain physically so much alike that it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between them."

"I didn't mean only that," she said quickly.

"You meant the double in mind and soul as well as in body," said Chichester.

"Yes."

"How can one see if a soul is the double of another soul?" said Malling.

“Then you think such a story as Mr. Chichester related in his sermon all nonsense?” said Lady Sophia, almost hotly, and yet, it seemed to Malling, with a slight lifting of the countenance, as if relief perhaps were stealing through her.

“I thought it a legitimate and powerful invention introduced to point a moral.”

“Nothing more than that?” said Lady Sophia.

Malling did not reply; for suddenly a strange question had risen up in him. Did he really think it nothing more than that? He glanced at Chichester, and the curate’s eyes seemed asking him to say.

The rector’s heavy and powerful frame shifted in his chair, and his voice was heard saying:

“My dear Sophy, I think you had better leave such things alone. You do not know where they might lead you.”

There was in his voice a sound of forced authority, as if he had been obliged to “screw himself up” to speak as he had just spoken. Lady Sophia was about to make a quick rejoinder when, still with a forced air of resolution, Mr. Harding addressed himself to Chichester.

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"Since I saw you this morning," he said, "I find that I shall not be here next Sunday."

He looked about the circle at his wife and Malling.

"The doctor has ordered me away for a week, and I've decided to go."

His introduction of the subject had been abrupt. As if almost in despite of themselves, Lady Sophia and Malling exchanged glances. Chichester said nothing.

"You can get on without me quite well, of course," continued the rector.

"Are you going to be away long?" said Chichester.

"No; I think only for a week or so. The doctor says I absolutely need a breath of fresh air."

Malling got up to go.

"I hope you'll enjoy your little holiday," he said. "Are you going far?"

"Oh, dear, no. My doctor recommends Tankerton on the Kentish coast. It seems the air there is extraordinary. When the tide is down it comes off the mud flats. A kind parishioner of mine—" he turned slightly toward his wife: "Mrs. Amherst, Sophy—has a cottage there and has often offered me the use of it. I hope to accept her offer now."

Lady Sophia expressed no surprise at the project, and did not inquire whether her husband wished her to accompany him.

But when she shook hands with Malling, her dark eyes seemed to say to him, "I was wrong."

And he thought she looked humbled.

VIII

"Could you come down stay with me Saturday till Monday all alone air delicious feel rather solitary glad of your company Marcus Harding Minors Tankerton Kent."

Such was the telegram which Evelyn Malling was considering on the following Friday afternoon. The sender had paid an answer. The telegraph-boy was waiting in the hall. Malling only kept him five minutes. He went away with this reply:

"Accept with pleasure will take four twenty train at Victoria Saturday Malling."

Malling could not have said with truth that he had expected a summons from Mr. Harding, yet he found that he was not surprised to get it. The man was in a bad way. He needed sympathy, he needed help. That was certain. But whether he could help him was more than doubtful, Malling thought. Perhaps, really, a doctor and the wonderful air from the mud flats of Tankerton! But here Malling found that a strong incredulity checked him. He did not believe that the rector would be restored by a doctor's advice and a visit to the sea.

That afternoon he went to Westminster, and asked for Professor Stepton.

"He is away, sir," said the fair Scotch parlormaid.

"For long?"

"We don't know, sir. He has gone into Kent, on research business, I believe."

Agnes had been for a long time in the professor's service, and was greatly trusted. The professor had come upon her originally when making investigations into "second sight," a faculty which she claimed to possess. By the way she was also an efficient parlor-maid.

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"Kent!" said Malling. "Do you know where he is staying?"

"The address he left is the Tankerton Hotel, Tankerton, near Whitstable-on-Sea, sir."

"Thank you, Agnes," said Malling.

"It is a haunted house somewhere Birchington way the professor is after, I believe, sir."

"Luck favors me!" said Malling to himself, unscientifically, as he walked away from the house.

On the following day it was in a singularly expectant and almost joyously alert frame of mind that he bought a first-class ticket for Whitstable-on-Sea, which is the station for Tankerton.

He would involve Stepton in this affair. There was a mystery in it. Malling was now convinced of that. And his original supposition did not satisfy him. But perhaps Mr. Harding meant to help him. Perhaps Mr. Harding intended to be explicit. The difficulty there was that he also was walking in darkness, as Malling believed. His telegram had come like a cry out of this darkness.

"Faversham! Faversham!" the fair Kentish porters were calling. Only about twenty minutes now! Would the rector be at the station?

He was. As the train ran in alongside the wooden platform, Malling caught sight of the towering authoritative figure. Was it his fancy which made him think that it looked slightly bowed, even perhaps a little shrunken?

"Good of you to come!" said the rector in a would-be hearty voice, but also with a genuine accent of pleasure. "All the afternoon I have been afraid of a telegram."

"Why?" asked Malling, as they shook hands.

"Oh, when one is anxious for a thing, one does not always get it. Ha, ha!"

He broke into a covering laugh.

"Here is a porter. You've only got this bag. Capital! I have a fly waiting. We go down these steps."

As they descended, Malling remarked:

"By the way, we have a friend staying here. Have you come across him?"

"No, I have seen nobody—that is, no acquaintance. Who is it?"

“Stepton.”

“The professor down here!” exclaimed Mr. Harding, as if startled.

“At the hotel, I believe. He’s come down to make some investigation.”

“I haven’t seen him.”

They stepped into the fly, and drove through the long street of Whitstable toward the outlying houses of Tankerton, scattered over grassy downs above a quiet, brown sea.

“The air is splendid, certainly,” observed Malling, drinking it in almost like a gourmet savoring a wonderful wine.

“It must do me good. Don’t you think so?”

The question sounded anxious to Malling’s ears.

“It ought to do every one good, I should think.”

“Here is Minors.”

The fly stopped before a delightfully gay little red doll’s house—so Malling thought of it—standing in a garden surrounded by a wooden fence, with the downs undulating about it. Not far off, but behind it, was the sea. And the rector, pointing to a red building in the distance, on the left and much nearer to the beach, said:

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"That is the hotel where the professor must be staying, if he is here."

"I'll go over presently and ask about him."

"Oh," said Mr. Harding. "Bring in the bag, please, Jennings. The room on the right, at the top of the stairs."

Malling had believed in London that Mr. Harding's telegram to him was a cry out of darkness. That first evening in the cheerful doll's house he knew his belief was well founded. When they sat at dinner, like two monsters, Malling thought, who had somehow managed to insert themselves into a doll's dining-room, it was obvious that the rector was ill at ease. Again and again he seemed to be on the verge of some remark, perhaps of some outburst of speech, and to check himself only when the words were almost visibly trembling on his lips. In his eyes Malling saw plainly his longing for utterance, his hesitation; reserve and a desire to liberate his soul, the one fighting against the other. And at moments the whole man seemed to be wrapped in weakness like a garment, the soul and the body of him. Then, as a light may dwindle till it seems certain to go out, all that was Marcus Harding seemed to Malling to dwindle. The large body, the powerful head and face, meant little, almost nothing, because the spirit was surely fading. But these moments passed. Then it was as if the light flared suddenly up again.

When dinner was over, Mr. Harding asked Malling if he would like to take a stroll.

"The sea air will help us to sleep," he said.

"I should like nothing better," said Malling. "Haven't you been sleeping well lately?"

"Very badly. We had better take our coats."

They put the coats on, and went out, making their way to the broad, grassy walk raised above the shingle of the beach. The tide was far down, and the oozing flats were uncovered. So still, so waveless was the brown water that at this hour it was impossible to perceive where it met the brown land. In the distance, on the right, shone the lights of Herne Bay, with its pier stretching far out into the shallows. Away to the left was the lonely island of Sheppey, a dull shadow beyond the harbor, where the oyster-boats lay at rest. There were very few people about: some fisher-lads solemnly or jocosely escorting their girls, who giggled faintly as they passed Mr. Harding and Malling; two or three shopkeepers from Whitstable taking the air; a boatman or two vaguely hovering, with blue eyes turned from habit to the offing.

The two men paced slowly up and down. And again Malling was aware of words trembling upon the rector's lips—words which he could not yet resolve frankly to utter. Whether it was the influence of the faintly sighing sea, of the almost sharply pure air, of

the distant lights gleaming patiently, or whether an influence came out from the man beside him and moved him, Malling did not know; but he resolved to do a thing quite contrary to his usual practice. He resolved to try to force a thing on, instead of waiting till it came to him naturally. He became impatient, he who was generally a patient seeker.

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"You remember our former conversations with regard to Henry Chichester?" he said abruptly, changing the subject of their discourse.

"Chichester? Yes—yes. What of him?"

"I wish to tell you that I think you are right, that I think there is an extraordinary, even an amazing, change in Chichester."

"There is, indeed," said Mr. Harding. "And—and it will increase."

He spoke with a sort of despairing conviction.

"What makes you think so?"

"It must. It cannot be otherwise—unless—"

He paused.

"Yes," said Malling; "unless—"

"A thing almost impossible were to happen."

"May I, without indiscretion, ask what that is?"

"Unless he were to leave St. Joseph's, to go quite away."

"Surely that would not be impossible!"

"I often think it is. Chichester will not wish to go."

"Are you certain of that?" asked Malling, remembering the curate's remark in Horton Street, that perhaps he would not remain at St. Joseph's much longer.

The rector turned his head and fixed his eyes upon Malling.

"Has he said anything to you about leaving?" he asked, suddenly raising his voice, as if under the influence of excitement. "But of course he has not."

"Surely it is probable that such a man may be offered a living."

"He would not take it."

They walked on a few steps in silence, turned, and strolled back. It was now growing dark. Their faces were set toward the distant gleam of the Herne Bay lights.

"I am not so sure," at length dropped out Malling.



“Why are you not so sure?”

“Why do you think Chichester’s departure from St. Joseph’s impossible?”

Malling spoke strongly to determine, if possible, the rector to speak, to say out all that was in his heart.

“Can I tell you?” Mr. Harding almost murmured. “Can I tell you?”

“I think you asked me here that you might tell me something.”

“It is true. I did.”

“Then—”

“Let us sit down in this shelter. There is no one in it. People are going home.”

Malling followed him into a shelter, with a bench facing the sea.

“I thought perhaps here I might be able to tell you,” said Mr. Harding. “I am in great trouble, Mr. Malling, in great trouble. But I don’t know whether you, or whether any one, can assist me.”

“If I may advise you, I should say—tell me plainly what your trouble is.”

“It began—” Mr. Harding spoke with a faltering voice—“it began a good while ago, some months after Mr. Chichester came as a curate to St. Joseph’s. I was then a very different man from the man you see now. Often I feel really as if I were not the same man, as if I were radically changed. It may be health. I sometimes try to think so. And then I—” He broke off.

The strange weakness that Malling had already noticed seemed again to be stealing over him, like a mist, concealing, attenuating.

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"Possibly it is a question of health," said Malling, rather sharply. "Tell me how it began."

"When Chichester first joined me, I was a man of power and ambition. I was a man who could dominate others, and I loved to dominate."

His strength seemed returning while he spoke, as if frankness were to him a restorative of the spirit.

"It was indeed my passion. I loved authority. I loved to be in command. I was full of ecclesiastical ambition. Feeling that I had intellectual strength, I intended to rise to the top of the church, to become a bishop eventually, perhaps even something greater. When I was presented to St. Joseph's,—my wife's social influence had something to do with that,—I saw all the gates opening before me. I made a great effect in London. I may say with truth that no clergyman was more successful than I was—at one time. My wife spurred me on. She was immensely ambitious for me. I must tell you that in marrying me she had gone against all her family. They thought me quite unworthy of her notice. But from the first time I met her I meant to marry her. And as I dominated others, I completely dominated her. But she, once married to me, was desperately anxious that I should rise in the world, in order that her choice of me might be justified in the eyes of her people. You can understand the position, I dare say?"

"Perfectly," said Malling.

"I may say that she irritated my ambition, that she stung it into almost a furious activity. Women have great influence with us. I thought she was my slave almost, but I see now that she also influenced me. She worshiped me for my immediate success at St. Joseph's. You may think it very ridiculous, considering that I am merely the rector of a fashionable London church, but there was a time when I felt almost intoxicated by my wife's worship of me, and by my domination over the crowds who came to hear me preach. Domination! That was my fetish! That was what led me to—oh, sometimes I think it must end in my ruin!"

"Perhaps not," said Malling, quietly. "Let us see."

His words, perhaps even more his manner, seemed greatly to help Mr. Harding.

"I will tell you everything," he exclaimed. "From the first I have felt as if you were the man to assist me, if any man could. I had always, since I was an undergraduate at Oxford,—I was a Magdalen man,—been interested in psychical matters, and followed carefully all the proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research. I had also at that time,—in Oxford,—made some experiments with my college friends, chiefly in connection with will power. My influence seemed to be specially strong. But I need not go into all that. After leaving Oxford and taking orders, for a long time I gave such matters up. I feared, if I showed my strong interest in psychical research, especially if I

was known to attend seances or anything of that kind, it might be considered unsuitable in a clergyman, and might injure my prospects. It was not until Henry Chichester came to St. Joseph's that I was tempted again into paths which I had chosen to consider forbidden to me. Chichester tempted me! Chichester tempted me!"

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He spoke the last words with a sort of lamentable energy.

“Such a gentle, yielding man as he was!”

“It was just that. He came under my influence at once, and showed it in almost all he said and did. He looked up to me, he strove to model himself upon me, he almost worshiped me. One evening,—it was in the pulpit!—the idea shot through my brain, ‘I could do what I like with that man, make of him just what I choose, use him just as I please.’ And I turned my eyes toward the choir where Chichester sat in the last stall, hanging on my words. At that instant I can only suppose that what people sometimes call the *maladie de grandeur*—the mania for power—took hold upon me, and combined with my furtive longing after research in those mysterious regions where perhaps all we desire is hidden. Anyhow, at that instant I resolved to try to push my influence over Chichester to its utmost limit, and by illegitimate means.”

“Illegitimate?”

“I call them so. Yes, yes, they are not legitimate. I know that now. And he—but I dare not think what he knows!”

The rector was greatly moved. He half rose from the bench on which they were sitting, then, making a strong effort, controlled himself, sank back, and continued:

“At that time, in the early days of his association with me, Chichester thought that everything I did, everything I suggested, even everything that came into my mind, must be good and right. He never dreamed of criticizing me. In his view, I was altogether above criticism. And if I approached him with any sort of intimacy he was in the greatest joy. You know, perhaps, Mr. Malling, how the worshiper receives any confidence from the one he worships. He looks upon it as the greatest compliment that can be paid him. I resolved to pay that compliment to Henry Chichester.

“You must know that although I had entirely given up the occult practices—that may not be the exact term, but you will understand what I mean—I had indulged in at Oxford, I had never relaxed my deep, perhaps my almost morbid interest in the efforts that were being made by scientists and others to break through the barrier dividing us on earth from the spirit world. Although I had chosen the career of a clergyman,—alas! I looked upon the church, I suppose, as little more than a career!—I was not a very faithful man. I had many doubts which, as clergymen must, I concealed. By nature I suppose I had rather an incredulous mind. Not that I was a skeptic, but I was sometimes a doubter. Rather than faith, I should have much preferred to have knowledge, exact knowledge. Often I even felt ironical when confronted with the simple faith we clergymen should surely encourage, sustain, and humbly glory in, whereas with skepticism, even when openly expressed, I always felt some part of myself to be in secret sympathy. I

continued to study works, both English and foreign, on psychical research. I followed the experiments of Lodge,

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William James, and others. Myers's great work on human personality was forever at my elbow. And the longer I was debarred—self-debarred because of my keen ambition and my determination to do nothing that could ever make me in any way suspect in the eyes of those to whom I looked confidently for preferment—from continuing the practices which had such a fascination for me, the more intensely I was secretly drawn toward them. The tug at my soul was at last almost unbearable. It was then I looked toward Chichester, and resolved to take him into my confidence—to a certain extent.

"I approached the matter craftily. I dwelt first upon the great spread of infidelity in our days, and the necessity of combating it by every legitimate means. I spoke of the efforts being made by earnest men of science—such men as Professor Stepton, for instance—to get at the truth Christians are expected to take on trust, as it were. I said I respected such men. Chichester agreed,—when did he not agree with me at that time?—but remarked that he could not help pitying them for ignoring revelation and striving to obtain by difficult means what all Christians already possessed by a glorious and final deed of gift.

"I saw that though Chichester was such a devoted worshiper of mine, if I wanted to persuade him to my secret purpose,—no other than the effort, to be made with him, to communicate with the spirit world,—I must be deceptive, I must mask my purpose with another.

"I did so. I turned his attention to the subject of the human will. Now, at that time Chichester knew that his will was weak. He considered that fact one of his serious faults. I hinted that I agreed with him. I proposed to join with him in striving to strengthen it. He envied my strength of will. He looked up to me, worshiped me almost, because of it. I drew his mind to the close consideration of influence. I gave him two or three curious works that I possessed on this subject. In one of them, a pamphlet written by a Hindu who had been partly educated at Oxford, and whom I had personally known when I was an undergraduate, there was a course of will-exercises, much as in certain books on body-building there are courses of physical exercises. I related to Chichester some of the extraordinary and deeply interesting conversations I had had with this Hindu on the subject of the education of the will, and finally I told a lie. I told Chichester that I had gained my powerful will while at Oxford by drawing it from my Hindu friend in a series of sittings that we two had secretly undertaken together. This was false, because I had been born with a strong, even a tyrannical, will, and I had never sat with the Hindu.

"Chichester, though at first startled, was fascinated by this untruth, and, to cut the matter short, I persuaded him to begin with me a series of secret sittings, in which I proposed to try to impart to him, to infuse into him, as it were, some of my undoubted power—the

power which he daily saw me exercising in the pulpit and over the minds of men in my intercourse with them.

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“What I really wished to do, what I meant to do, if possible, was to use Chichester as a medium, and to try through him to communicate with the spirit world. I had taken it into my head—no doubt you will say quite unreasonably—that he must be entirely subject to my will in a sitting, and that if I willed him to be entranced, it was certain that he would become so. But my own entirely selfish desires I concealed under the cloak of an unselfish wish to give power to him. I even pretended, as you see, to have a highly moral purpose, though it is true I suggested trying to effect it in an unconventional and very unecclasiastical manner.

“Chichester, though, as I have said, at first startled, of course eventually fell in with my view. We sat together in his room at Hornton Street.

“Now, Mr. Malling, some of what I have told you may appear to be almost contradictory. I have spoken of my *maladie de grandeur* as if it were a reason why I wished to sit with Henry Chichester, and then of my desire to communicate, if possible, with the spirit world as my reason.”

“I noticed that,” observed Malling, “and purposed later to point it out to you.”

“How can I explain exactly? It is so difficult to unravel the web of motives in a mind. It was my *maladie de grandeur*, I think, that made me long to use my worshiper Chichester as a mere tool for the opening of that door which shuts off from us the region the dead have entered. My mind at that time was filled with a mingled conceit, amounting at moments almost to an intoxication, and a desire for knowledge. I reveled in my power when preaching, but was haunted by genuine doubts as to truth. My egoism longed to make an utter slave of Chichester (I nearly always lusted to push my influence to its limit). But my desire to know made me conceive the pushing of it in a direction, in this instance, which would perhaps gratify a less unworthy desire than that merely of subjugating another. The two birds and the one stone! I thought of them. I loved the idea of making a tool. I loved also the idea of using the tool when made. And I pretended I had only Chichester’s moral interest at heart. I have been punished, terribly punished.

“We sat, as I say, in Hornton Street, secretly, and of course at night. My wife knew nothing of it. I made excuses to get away—parish matters, meetings, work in the East End. I had no difficulty with her. She thought my many activities would bring me ever more and more into the public eye, and she encouraged them. The people in the house where Chichester lodged were simple folk, and were ready to go early to bed, leaving rector and curate discussing their work for the salvation of bodies and souls.

“At first Chichester was reluctant, I know. I read his thoughts. He was not sure that it was right to approach such mysteries; but, as usual, I dominated him silently. And soon he fell completely under the fascination peculiar to sittings.”

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Again Mr. Harding paused. For a moment his head sank, his powerful body drooped, he was immersed in reverie. Malling did not interrupt him. At last, with a deep sigh, and now speaking more slowly, more unevenly, he continued:

“What happened exactly at those sittings I do not rightly know. Perhaps I shall never rightly know. What did not happen I can tell you. In the first place, although I secretly used my will upon Chichester, desiring, mentally insisting, that he should become entranced, he never was entranced when we sat together. Something within him—was it something holy? I have wondered—resisted my desire, of which, so far as I know, he was never aware. Perhaps ‘beneath the threshold’ he was aware. Who can say? But though my great desire was frustrated in our sittings, the desire of Chichester, so different, perhaps so much more admirable than mine, and, at any rate, not masked by any deceit, began, so it seemed, to be strangely gratified. He declared almost from the first that, when sitting with me, he felt his will power strengthened. ‘You are doing me good,’ he said. Now, as my professed object in contriving the sittings had been to lift up Chichester toward my level,”—with indescribable bitterness Mr. Harding dwelt on these last words,—“I could only express rejoicing. And this I did with successful hypocrisy. Nevertheless, I was greatly irritated. For it seemed to me that, when we sat, Chichester triumphed over me. He obtained his desire while mine remained ungratified. This was an outrage directed against my supremacy over him, which I had designed to increase. I gathered together my will power to check it. But in this attempt I failed.

“Nothing is stranger, I think, Mr. Malling, than the fascination of a sitting. Even when nothing, or scarcely anything, happens, the mind, the whole nature seems to be mysteriously grasped and held. New senses in you seem to be released. Something is alert which is never alert—or, at all events, never alert in the same way—in other moments of life. One seems to become inexplicably different. Chichester was aware of all this. At the first sitting nothing happened, and I feared Chichester would wish to give the matter up. But, no! When we rose from our chairs late in the night he acknowledged that he had never known two hours to pass so quickly before. At following sittings there were slight manifestations such as, I suppose, are seldom absent from such affairs,—perfectly trivial to you, of course,—movements of the table, rappings, gusts of what seemed cold air, and so forth. All that is not worth talking about, and I don’t mean to trouble you further with it. My difficulty is, when so little, apparently, took place, to make you understand the tremendous thing that did happen, that must have been happening gradually during our sittings.

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“At the very first, as I told you, or nearly so,—I wish to be absolutely accurate,—Chichester began to be aware of a strengthening of his will. At this time I was almost angrily unaware of any change either in him or in myself. At subsequent sittings—I speak of the earlier ones—Chichester reiterated more strongly his assertion of beneficent alteration in himself. I did not believe him, though I did believe he was absolutely sincere in his supposition. It seemed to me that he was ‘suggestioned,’ partly perhaps by his implicit trust in me, partly by his own desire that something curious should happen. However, still playing a part in pursuance of my resolve not to let Chichester know my real object in this matter, I pretended that I, too, perceived an alteration in him, as if his personality were strengthening. And not once, but on several occasions, I spoke of the change in him as almost exactly corresponding with the change that had taken place in me when I sat with my Hindu friend.

“All this time, with a force encouraged by the secret anger within me, I violently, at last almost furiously, willed that Chichester should become entranced.

“But at length, though I willed furiously, I felt as if I were not willing with genuine strength, as if I could not will with genuine strength any longer. It is difficult, almost impossible, to explain to you exactly the sensation that gradually overspread me; but it used always to seem to me, when I self-consciously exerted my will, as if I held within me some weapon almost irresistible, as if I forced it forward, as if its advance, caused by me, could not be withstood. I now felt as if I still possessed this weapon, but could not induce it to move. It was there, like a heavy, useless thing, almost like a burden upon me.

“And Chichester continued to assert that he felt stronger, more resolute, less plastic.

“Things went on thus till something within me, what we call instinct, I suppose, became uneasy. I heard a warning voice which said to me, ‘Stop while there is time!’ And I resolved to obey it.

“One night, when very late Chichester and I took our hands from the table in his little room, I said that I thought we had had enough of the sittings, that very little happened, that perhaps he and I were not really *en rapport*, and that it seemed to me useless to continue them. I suppose I expected Chichester to acquiesce. I say I suppose so, because till that moment he had always acquiesced in any proposition of mine. Yet I remember that I did not feel genuine surprise at what actually happened.”

Mr. Harding stopped, took a handkerchief from his pocket, lifted the brim of his hat, and passed the handkerchief over his forehead two or three times.

“What happened was this, that Chichester resisted my proposal, and that I found myself obliged to comply with his will instead of, as usual, imposing mine upon him.

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"This was the beginning—" the rector turned a little toward Malling, and spoke in a voice that was almost terrible in its sadness—"this was the beginning of what you have been witness of, my unspeakable decline. This was the definite beginning of my horrible subjection to Henry Chichester."

He stopped abruptly. After waiting for a minute or two, expecting him to continue, Malling said:

"You said that you found yourself *obliged* to comply with Chichester's will. Can you explain the nature of that obligation?"

"I cannot. I strove to resist. We argued the matter. He took his stand upon the moral ground that I was benefiting him enormously through our sittings. As I had suggested having them ostensibly for that very purpose, you will see my difficulty."

"Certainly."

"My yielding seemed perfectly natural, perhaps almost inevitable. The point is that, without drastic change in me, it was quite unnatural. My will was unaccustomed to brook any resistance, and troubled itself not at all with argument. Till then what I wished to do I did, and there was an end. I now for the first time found myself obliged to accept a moral bondage imposed upon me by my curate. The term may sound exaggerated; I can only say that was how the matter presented itself to me. From the moment I did so, I took second place to him.

"We continued to sit from time to time. And the strange, to me inexplicable, situation rapidly developed.

"To put it before you in few words and plainly: Chichester seemed to suck my will away from me gradually but surely, till my former strength was his. But that was not all. With the growth of his will there was another and more terrible growth: there rose in him a curiously observant faculty."

Again the rector took out his handkerchief and wiped his brow.

"A curiously critical faculty. How shall I say? Perhaps you may know, Mr. Malling, how the persistent attitude of one mind may influence another. For instance, if a man always expects ill of another—treachery, let us say, bad temper, hatred, fear, inducing trickery, perhaps, that other is turned toward just such evil manifestations in connection with that man. If some one with psychic force thinks all you do is wrong, soon you begin to do things wrongly. A fearful uneasiness is bred. The faculties begin to fail. The formerly sure-footed stumbles. The formerly self-confident takes on nervousness, presently fear.

"So it came about between Chichester and me. I felt that his mind was beginning to watch me critically, and I became anxious about this criticism. Like some subtle acid it



seemed to act destructively upon the metal, once so hard and resistant, of my self-confidence, of my belief in myself. Often I felt as if an eye were upon me, seeing too much, far too much, coldly, inexorably, persistently. This critical observation became hateful to me. I suffered under it. I suffered terribly. Mr. Malling, if I am to tell you all,—and I feel that unless I do no help can come to me,—I must tell you that I have not been in my life all that a clergyman should be. There have been occasions, and even since my marriage, when I have yielded to impulses that have prompted me to act very wrongly.

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"Now, Chichester was a saint. Hitherto I had neither been troubled by my own grave shortcomings nor by Chichester's excellence of character. I had always felt myself set far above him by my superior mental faculties and my greater will power over the crowd, though, alas! not always over my own demon. I began to writhe now under the thought of Chichester's crystal purity and of my own besmirched condition of soul. All self-confidence departed from me; but I endeavored, of course, to conceal this from the world, and especially from Chichester. With the world for a time no doubt I succeeded. But with Chichester—did I ever succeed? Could I ever succeed with such an one as he had become? It seemed to me, it seems to me far more terribly now, that nothing I did, or was, escaped him. He attended mentally, spiritually even, to everything that made up me. At first I felt this curiously, then anxiously, then often with bitter contempt and indignation, sometimes with a great melancholy, a sort of wide-spreading sadness in which I was involved as in an icy sea. I can never make you fully understand what I felt, how this mental and spiritual observation of Chichester affected me. It—it simply ate me away, Malling! It simply ate me away!"

The last words came from Mr. Harding's lips almost in a cry.

"And how long did you continue the sittings?"

Very quietly Malling spoke, and he just touched the rector's arm.

"For a long while."

"Had you ceased from them when I first met you?"

"On Westminster Bridge? No."

"Have you ceased from them now?"

The rector shifted as if in physical distress.

"Chichester constrains me to them even now," he replied, like a man bitterly ashamed. "He constrains me to them. And is that goodness, righteousness? I said he was a saint; but now! Is it saintliness to torture a fellow-creature?"

Malling remembered how he had once, and not long ago, asked himself whether Chichester's mouth and eyes looked good.

"Have you ever told Chichester what grave distress he is causing you?" said Malling.

"No, never, never! I can't!"

"Why not?"

“A great reserve has grown up between us. I could never try to break through it.”

“You say a great reserve. But does he never criticize you in words? Does he never express an adverse opinion upon what you say or do?”

“Scarcely ever—after it is said or done. But sometimes—”

“Yes?”

“Sometimes—often I think—he tries to prevent me from saying or doing something. Often he checks me with a look when I am in the midst of some speech. It is intolerable. Why do I bear it? But I have to bear it. Sometimes I exert myself against him. Why, that first day I met you—you must have noticed it—he tried to prevent me from walking home with you.”

“I did notice it.”

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"Then I resisted him, and he had to yield. But even when he yields in some slight matter it makes no difference in our relations. He is always there, at the window, watching me."

"What do you say?"

Malling's exclamation was sharp.

"That sermon of his!" said the rector. "That fearful sermon! Ever since I heard it I have felt as if I were the double within that house, as if Chichester were the man regarding my life in hiding. Why you—you yourself put my feeling into words! You suggested to Chichester and my wife that if the man had stayed, had spied upon him who was within the room, the hypocrite—"

He broke off. He got up from his seat.

"Let us walk," he said. "I cannot sit here. The air—the lights—let us—"

Almost as if blindly he went forth from the shelter, followed by Malling.

"It's better here," he said. "Better here! Mr. Malling, forgive me, but just then a hideous knowledge seemed really to catch me by the throat. Chichester is turning my wife against me. There is a terrible change in her. She is beginning to observe me through Chichester's eyes. Till quite recently she worshiped me. She noticed the alteration in me, of course,—every one did,—but she hated Chichester for his attitude toward me. Till quite lately she hated him. Now she no longer hates him; for she begins to think he is right. At first I think she believed the excuse I put forward for my strange transformation."

"Do you mean your nervous affection?"

"Yes."

"Just tell me, have you any trouble of that kind, or did you merely invent it as an excuse for any failure you made from time to time?"

"I used it insincerely as an excuse. But I really do suffer from time to time physically. But physical suffering is nothing. Why should we waste a thought on such nonsense?"

"In such a strange case as this I believe everything should be taken carefully into consideration," observed Malling in his most prosaic voice.

The rector's attention seemed to be suddenly fixed and powerfully concentrated. The feverish excitement he had been displaying gave place to a calmer, more natural mood.



“Tell me,” he said, “do you think your knowledge can help me? I am aware that you have made many strange investigations. Is there anything to be done for me, anything that will restore me to my former powers? Will you credit me when I declare to you that it was only by making a terrible effort that I was able to get away from Chichester’s companionship and to come down here? If I had not said that I meant to do so while you were in the room, I doubt if I should ever have had the courage. There is something inexplicable that seems to bind me to Chichester. Sometimes there have been moments when I have thought that he longed to be far away from me. And it has seemed to me that he, too, would find escape difficult, if not impossible.”

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"You wish very much that Chichester should resign his curacy and go entirely out of your life?" asked Malling.

"Wish!" cried Mr. Harding, almost fiercely. "Oh, the unutterable relief to me if he were to go! Even down here, away from him for a day or two, I sometimes feel released. And yet—" he paused in his walk—"I shall have to go back—I know it—sooner than I meant to, very soon."

He spoke with profound conviction.

"Chichester will mean me to go back, and I shall not be able to stay."

"And yet you say it has occurred to you that possibly Chichester may be as anxious as yourself to break away from the strange condition of things you have described to me."

"Have you," exclaimed Mr. Harding—"have you some reason to believe Chichester has ever contemplated departure?"

Malling moved slowly on, and the rector was forced to accompany him.

"It has occurred to me," he said, evading the point, "that possibly Henry Chichester might be induced to go out of your life."

"Never by me! I should never have the strength to attempt compulsion with Chichester."

"Some one else might tackle him."

"Who?" cried out Mr. Harding.

"Some man with authority."

"Do you mean ecclesiastical authority?"

"Oh, dear, no! I was thinking of a man like, say, Professor Stepton."

As Malling spoke, a curious figure seemed almost to dawn upon them, sidewise, becoming visible gently in the darkness; a short man, with hanging arms, a head poked forward, as if in sharp inquiry, and rather shambling legs, round which hung loosely a pair of very baggy, light trousers.

"And here is the professor!" said Malling, stopping short.

IX

That night when, very late, Mr. Harding and Malling returned to the red doll's house and let themselves into it with a latch-key, they found lying upon the table in the little hall a brown envelop.

"A telegram!" said the rector.

He took it into his hand and read the name on the envelop.

"It's for me. Malling, do you know whom this telegram is from?"

"How can I, or you, for that matter?"

"It is from Henry Chichester, and it is to recall me to London."

"It may be so."

"It is so. Open it for me."

Malling took the telegram from him and tore it open, while he sat heavily down by the table.

"Please return if possible difficulties in the parish Benyon ill need your presence Chichester."

Malling looked down at the rector.

"You see!" Mr. Harding said slowly.

"What do you mean to do?"

Mr. Harding got up from his chair with an effort like that of a weary man.

"I wonder where the railway-guide is?" he said. "Excuse me for a moment, Mr. Malling."

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He went away into the drawing-room, and returned with the railway-guide open in his hand.

“Malling,” he said, using the greater familiarity he had for a moment discarded, “I am about to do a rude thing, but I ask you, I beg of you, to acquit me of any rude intention toward yourself. I have been looking up the Sunday trains. I find I can catch a good one at Faversham to-morrow morning. There is a motor I can hire in the town to get there. It stands just by the post-office, where the road branches.” He paused, looking into Malling’s face as if in search of some sign of vexation or irony. “With a large parish on my hands,” he went on, “I have a great responsibility. And if Benyon, my second curate, is ill, they will be short-handed.”

“I see.”

“What distresses me greatly—greatly—is leaving you, my guest, at such short notice. I cannot say how I regret it.”

He stopped. Purposely, to test him, Malling said nothing, but waited with an expressionless face.

“I cannot say. But how can I do otherwise? My duty to the parish must come before all things.”

“I see,” said Malling again.

Looking greatly disturbed, Mr. Harding continued:

“I will ask you to do me a very great favor. Although I am obliged to go, I hope you will stay, I entreat you to stay till Monday. The professor is here. You will not be companionless. The servants will do everything to make you comfortable. As to food, wine—everything is provided for. Will you stay? I shall feel more at ease in going if I know my departure has not shortened your visit.”

“It is very good of you,” Malling replied. “I’ll accept your kind offer. To tell the truth, I’m in no hurry to leave the Tankerton air.”

“Thank you,” said the rector, almost with fervor. “Thank you.”

So, the next morning, Mr. Harding went away in the hired motor, and Malling found himself alone in the red doll’s house.

He was not sorry. The rector’s revelation on the previous night had well repaid him for his journey; then the air of Tankerton really rejoiced him; and he would have speech of the professor.

"I shall lay it before Stepton," he had said to Mr. Harding the previous night, after they had parted from the professor.

And he had spoken with authority. Mr. Harding's confidence, his self-abasement, and his almost despairing appeal, had surely given Malling certain rights. He intended to use them to the full. The rector's abrupt relapse into reserve, his pitiful return to subterfuge, after the receipt of that hypnotizing telegram, had not, in Malling's view, abrogated those rights.

When the motor disappeared, he strolled across the grass with a towel and had a dip in the brown sea, going in off the long shoal that the Whitstable and Tankerton folk call "the Street." Then he set out to find the professor.

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His interview with Stepton on the previous night in the presence of Mr. Harding had been rather brief. Stepton had been preoccupied and monosyllabic. Agnes had been right as to his reason for honoring the coast of Kent with his company, but wrong as to the haunted house's location. It was not in Birchington, but lay inland, within easy reach of Tankerton. When he met Malling and Harding, the professor was going to his hotel, where a motor was waiting to convey him to the house, in which he intended to pass the night. His mind was fixed tenaciously upon the matter in hand. Malling had realized at once that it was not the moment to disturb him by the introduction of any other affair, however interesting. But his suggestion of a meeting the next morning was thus welcomed:

"Right! I shall be at home at churchtime—as you're not preaching."

The second half of the sentence was directed to Mr. Harding, who said nothing.

"And you might give me a cup of tea in the afternoon," the professor had added, looking at the rector rather narrowly before shambling off to his hotel to get the plaid shawl which he often wore at night.

"With the greatest pleasure. Minors is the name of the house," had been Mr. Harding's reply.

Whereupon the professor had vanished, muttering to himself:

"Minors! And why not Majors, if you come to that? Perhaps too suggestive of heart-breaking military men. Minors is safer in a respectable seaside place."

The professor had been up all night, but looked much as usual, and was eating a hearty breakfast of bacon and eggs in the cheerful coffee-room when Malling arrived. He scarcely ever ate at orthodox hours, and had frequently been caught lunching at restaurants in London between four and five in the afternoon.

"Where's the rector? At church?" was his greeting.

"The rector has gone back to London," replied Malling, sitting down by the table.

"What about my cup of tea, then?" snapped Stepton.

"I will be your host. I'm here till to-morrow. Any interesting manifestations?"

"A rat or two and a hysterical kitchen-maid seem to be the responsible agents in the building up of the reputation of the house I kept awake in last night."

"I believe I have a more interesting problem for you."

The professor stretched out a sinewy hand.

“Cambridge marmalade! Most encouraging!” he muttered. “Have the reverend gentlemen of St. Joseph’s been at it again—successfully?”

“I want you to judge.”

And thereupon Malling laid the case faithfully before the professor, describing not only the dinner in Hornton Street and his interview with Lady Sophia, but also the two sermons he had heard at St. Joseph’s, and the rector’s lamentable outburst of the previous night. This last, having a remarkably retentive memory, he reproduced in the main in Mr. Harding’s own words, omitting only the rector’s reference to his moral lapses. During the whole time he was speaking Stepton was closely engaged with the Cambridge marmalade, and showed no symptoms of attention to anything else. When he ceased, Stepton remarked:

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"Really, clergymen are far more to be depended upon for valuable manifestations than a rat or two and a hysterical kitchen-maid. Come to my room, Malling."

The professor had a bedroom facing the sea. He led Malling to it, shut the door, gave Malling a cane chair, sat down himself, in a peculiar, crab-like posture, upon the bed, and said:

"Now give me as minute a psychological study of the former and actual Henry Chichester as you can."

Malling complied with this request as lucidly and tersely as he could, wasting no words.

"Any unusual change in his outward man since you knew him two years ago?" asked the professor, when he had finished.

Malling mentioned the question as to the curate's eyes and mouth which had risen in his mind, and added:

"But the character of the man is so changed that it may have suggestioned me into feeling as if there were physical change in him, too."

"More than would be inevitable in any man in a couple of years. And now as to his digestive organs."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Malling.

The apparent vagaries of his companion very seldom surprised him, but this time he was completely taken aback.

"Are they what they were? Assuming, on your part, a knowledge of what they were."

"I don't know either in what condition they are now, or in what condition they were once."

"Ah! Now I must draw up a report about last night. I'll come for that cup of tea to Minors—might almost as well have been Majors, even granting the military flavor—about five."

Malling took his departure.

At a quarter to five he heard the click of the garden gate, and looking out at the latticed window of the hall, he saw the professor walking sidewise up the path, with a shawl round his shoulders. He went to let him in, and took him into the tiny drawing-room.

"An odd shell for Harding!" observed the professor. "More suitable to a bantam than to a Cochin-China!"

“It doesn’t belong to him.”

“Nor he to it. Very wise and right of him to go back to Onslow Gardens.”

A maid brought in the tea, and the professor, spread strangely forth in a small, chintz-covered arm-chair, enjoyed it while he talked about oysters and oyster-beds. He was deeply interested in the oysters of Whitstable, and held forth almost romantically on their birth and upbringing, the fattening, the packing, the selling, and the eating of them —“with lemon, not vinegar, mind! To eat vinegar with a Whitstable native is as vicious as to offer a libation of catchup at the altar of a meadow mushroom just picked up out of the dew.”

Malling did not attempt to turn his mind from edibles. The professor had to be let alone. When tea was finished and cleared away, he observed:

“And now, Malling, what is your view? Do you look upon it as a case of transferred personality? I rather gathered from your general tone that you were mentally drifting in that direction.”

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"But are there such cases? Of double transfer, I mean?"

"Personally I have never verified one. When you spoke of the reverend gentlemen for the first time, I said, 'Study the link!' There will be development in the link if—all the rest of it."

"There has been development, as I told you. The link is on his side now."

"That's remarkable, undoubtedly. Has it ever struck you that Harding was almost too successful a clergyman to be a genuinely holy man?"

"What do you mean?"

"There's a modesty in holiness that is hardly adapted to catch smart women."

"You used to go to hear Harding preach."

"And d'you know why I liked his sermons?"

"Why?"

"Because he understood doubt so well. That amused me. But the man who has such a comprehensive understanding of skepticism, is very seldom a true believer. One thing, though, Harding certainly does believe in, judging by a sermon I once heard him preach."

"And that is?"

"Manicheism. Chichester, you say, was a saint?"

"He was, if a man can be a saint who has a certain amiable weakness of character."

"And now? You think he would be a difficult customer to tackle now?"

"Harding finds him so."

"And Harding was an overwhelming chap, cocksure of himself. Chichester must be difficult. Shall I tackle him?"

"I wish you would. But how? Do you wish me to introduce him to you?"

"Let me see."

The professor dropped his head and remained silent for a minute or two.

"Tell me something," he at length remarked, lifting his head and assuming his most terrier-like aspect. "Do you think Harding a whited sepulcher?"

"Possibly."

"And do you think his saintly curate has found it out?"

"Do you think that would supply a natural explanation of the mystery?"

"Should you prefer to search for it in that malefic region which is the abiding-place of nervous dyspepsia?"

"How could—"

"Acute nervous dyspepsia, complicated by a series of sittings under the rose, might eat away the most brazen self-confidence. That's as certain as that I wear whiskers and you don't. Shall we do an addition sum? Shall we add Chichester's discovery of secret lapses in his worshiped rector's life, to the nervous dyspepsia and the sittings? Shall we do that?"

"And Lady Sophia?"

"There's a sunflower type of woman. The rising sun can't escape her inevitable worship."

"The change in Harding may be a natural one. But there is something portentous in the change in Chichester," said Malling. "You know I'm a rather cool hand, and certainly not inclined to easy credulity. But there's something about Chichester which—well, Professor, I'll make a confession to you that isn't a pleasant one for any man to make. There's something about Chichester which shakes my nerves."

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"And you haven't got nervous dyspepsia?"

"Should I be even a meliorist—as I am—if I had?"

"I must know Chichester. It's a pity I didn't know him formerly."

"I don't believe that matters," said Malling, with intense conviction. "There is that in him which must strike you and affect you, whether you knew him as he was or not."

"So long as I don't turn tail and run from him, all's well. I will tackle Chichester. In the interests of science I will face this curate. But how shall I approach him? As in golf, the approach is much, if not everything."

He sat thinking for some minutes, with his eyebrows twitching. Then he said:

"The question is, Should the approach be casual or direct? Shall I describe a curve, or come to him as the crow comes when making for a given point—or is said to come, for I've never investigated that matter? What do you say?"

"It's very difficult to say. On the day I dined in Hornton Street, Chichester certainly wanted to tell me something. He asked me to dine, I am almost sure, in order that he might tell it to me."

"About the sittings with Harding, no doubt."

"That, perhaps, and something more."

"But he told you nothing."

"Directly."

"Do you think he would be more or less likely to unbosom himself now than he was then?"

"Less likely."

"You might give me his address."

Malling did so. The professor wrote the address down on a slip of paper, pinned the slip carefully to the yellow lining of his jacket, and then got up to go.

But Malling detained him.

"Professor," he said, speaking with an unusual hesitation, "you know why I told you all this."

"In the interests of science?"

"No, in the interest of that miserable man, Marcus Harding. I want you to break the link that binds him to Henry Chichester—if there is one. I want you to effect his release."

"I'm afraid you've come to the wrong man," returned Stepton, dryly. "My object in entering into this matter is merely to increase my knowledge, not to destroy my chance of increasing it."

"But surely—"

"We shall never get forward if we move in the midst of a fog of pity and sentiment."

Malling said no more; but as he watched the professor shambling to the garden gate, he felt as if he had betrayed Marcus Harding.

X

Soon after Malling had returned to London, he received the following note from Mr. Harding:

Onslow Gardens, June —th.

Dear Mr. Malling:

I seem to have some remembrance of your saying to me at Tankerton that you wished to speak to Professor Stepton with regard to a certain matter. I may be wrong in my recollection. If, however, I am right, I now beg you not to speak to the professor. I have, of course, the very highest regard for his discretion; nevertheless, one must not be selfish. One must not think only of one's self. I have obligations to others, and I fear, when we were together at Tankerton, I forgot them. A word of assurance from you that Professor Stepton knows nothing of our conversation will set at rest the mind of

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Yours sincerely,

Marcus Harding.

As soon as he had read this communication, Malling realized that he had been right in his supposition that a new reserve was growing up in Henry Chichester. He was aware of Chichester's reserve in the letter of the rector. He was aware, too, of the latter's situation as he had never been aware of it before. Often a trifle illuminates a life, as a search-light brings some distant place from the darkness into a fierce radiance that makes it seem near. So it was now.

"Poor Harding!" thought Malling, with an unusual softness. "But this letter comes too late."

What answer should he return to the rector? He hated insincerity, but on this occasion he stooped to it. He had not only the fear of Stepton upon him; he had also the desire not to add to the deep misery of Marcus Harding. This was his answer:

Cadogan Square, June —.

Dear Mr. Harding:

In reply to your letter, I will not now repeat our conversation of the other evening to Professor Stepton. He is, as you say, a man of the highest discretion, and should you feel inclined yourself to take him into your confidence at any time, I think you will not regret it.

Yours sincerely,

Evelyn Malling.

As he put this note into an envelope, Malling said to himself:

"Some day I'll let him know I deceived him; I'll let him know I had already told the professor."

Two or three days later Malling heard of the professor having been at a party in Piccadilly at which Lady Sophia was a guest.

"And do you know, really,"—Malling's informant, a lively married woman, concluded,— "those old scientific men are quite as bad as any of the boys who only want to have a good time. The professor sat in Lady Sophia's pocket the whole evening! Literally in her pocket!"

"I didn't know modern women had pockets," returned Malling.

“They don’t, of course; but you know what I mean.”

Malling understood that the professor was beginning his “approach.”

A week went by, and at a man’s dinner, Malling chanced to sit next to Blandford Sikes, one of the most noted physicians of the day. In the course of conversation the doctor remarked:

“Is your friend Stepton going to set up in Harley Street?”

“Not that I know of,” said Malling. “What makes you ask?”

“He came to consult me the other day, and when I told him he was as sound as Big Ben he sat with me for over half an hour pumping me unmercifully on the subject of nervous dyspepsia. The patient who followed, and who happened to be a clergyman, looked fairly sick when he was let in at last.”

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Who happened to be a clergyman! Malling had longed to ask Blandford Sikes a question—who that clergyman was. But he refrained. To do so, would doubtless have seemed oddly inquisitive. It was surely enough for him to know that the professor was busily at work in his peculiar way. And Malling thought again of that “approach.” Evidently the professor must be describing the curve he had spoken of. When would he arrive at Henry Chichester? There were moments when Malling felt irritated by Stepton’s silence. That it was emulated by Marcus Harding, Lady Sophia, and Henry Chichester did not make matters easier for him. However, he had deliberately chosen to put this strange affair into Stepton’s hands. Stepton had shown no special alacrity with regard to the matter. Malling felt that he could do nothing now but wait.

He waited.

Now and then rumors reached him of Marcus Harding’s fading powers, now and then he heard people discussing one of Henry Chichester’s “remarkable sermons,” now and then in society some feminine gossip murmuring that “Sophia Harding seems to be perfectly sick of that husband of hers. She probably wishes now that she had taken all her people’s advice and refused him. Of course if he had been made a *bishop*!”

The season ended. Goodwood was over, and Malling went off to Munich and Bayreuth for music. Then he made a walking-tour with friends in the Oberammergau district, and returned to England only when the ruddy banners of autumn were streaming over the land.

Still there was no communication from the professor. Malling might of course have written to him or sought him. He preferred to possess his soul in patience. Stepton was an arbitrary personage, and the last man in the world to consent to a process of pumping.

Meanwhile Stepton had forgotten all about Malling. He was full of work of various kinds, but the work that most interested him was connected with the reverend gentlemen of St. Joseph’s. As Malling surmised, he had lost little time in beginning his “approach,” and that approach had been rather circuitous. He had taken his own advice and studied the link. This done, the intricate and fascinating subject of nervous dyspepsia had claimed his undivided attention. When he had finished his prolonged interview with Blandford Sikes, sidling back to the waiting-room to gather up various impedimenta, he had encountered the unfortunate clergyman whom he had kept waiting. Marcus Harding was the man. They exchanged only a couple of words, but the sight of the flaccid bulk, the hanging cheeks and hands, the eyes in which dwelt a sort of faded despair, whipped up into keen alertness every faculty of the professor’s mind. As he walked into Cavendish Square he muttered to himself:

“I never saw a clergyman look more promising for investigation, by Jove! Never! There’s something in it. Malling was not entirely wrong. There’s certainly something in it.”

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But what? Now for Henry Chichester!

Stepton was by nature unemotional, but he was an implicit believer in the hysteria of others, and he thought clergymen, as a class, more liable to that malady than other classes of men. Curates, being as a rule young clergymen, were, in his view, specially subject to the inroads of the cloudy complaint, which causes the mind to see mountains where only mole-hills exist, and to appreciate anything more readily and accurately than the naked truth. Henry Chichester was young and he was a curate. He was therefore likely to be emotional and to be attracted by the mysterious, more especially since he had recently been knocking on its door, according to Malling's statement.

After a good deal of thought, the professor resolved to cast aside convention, and to make Chichester's acquaintance without any introduction; indeed, with the maximum of informality.

He learned something about Chichester's habits, and managed to meet him several times when he was walking from the daily service at St. Joseph's to his rooms in Hornton Street. In this walk Chichester passed the South Kensington Museum. What more natural than that the professor should chance to be coming out of it?

The first time they met, Stepton looked at the curate casually, the second time more sharply, the third time with scrutiny. He knew how to make a crescendo. The curate noticed it, as of course the professor intended. He did not know who Stepton was, but he began to wonder about this birdlike, sharp-looking man, who evidently took an interest in him. And presently his wonder changed into suspicion. This again accorded with the professor's intention.

One day, after the even-song at St. Joseph's, Stepton saw flit across the face of the curate, whom he was meeting, a flicker of something like fear. The two men passed each other, and immediately, like one irresistibly compelled, the professor looked back. As he did so, Chichester also turned round to spy upon this unknown. Encountering the gaze of the professor, he started, flushed scarlet, and pursued his way, walking with a quickened step.

The professor went homeward, chuckling.

"To-day's Tuesday," he thought. "By Saturday, at latest, he'll have spoken to me. He'll have to speak to me to relieve the tension of his nerve-ganglions."

Chichester did not wait till Saturday. On Friday afternoon, coming suddenly upon Stepton at a corner, he stopped abruptly, and said:

"May I ask if you want anything of me?"

"Sir!" barked Stepton. "Mr. Chichester!"

“You know my name?” said the curate.

“And probably you know mine—Professor Stepton.”

A relief that was evidently intense dawned in the curate’s face.

“You are Professor Stepton! You are Mr. Malling’s friend!”

“Exactly. Good day.”

And the professor marched on.

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Chichester did not follow, but the next day, on the pavement not far from the museum, he stopped once more in front of the professor with a "Good afternoon."

"Good day," said Stepton.

"Since you know who I am," began the curate, "and I have heard so much of you, I hope you will forgive me for asking you something."

"Certainly."

"What is it in me which has attracted your attention?"

"I wish I knew," returned the professor.

"You wish you knew! Do you mean that you don't know?"

"I don't know at all."

"But—but—you—I was not wrong in feeling sure that you were—that something in me had aroused your attention?"

"Not wrong at all; but 'something' is not the word."

"What is the word?"

"Everything. Everything in you rouses my attention, Mr. Chichester. But I can't think why."

"Did you know I was Mr. Harding's curate the first time you met me?"

"Yes; I had seen you at St. Joseph's once or twice when I came to hear your rector preach. You didn't interest me at all then, I'm bound to say."

Chichester stood in silence for a minute. Then he said:

"I might walk a little way back with you, if you have no objection."

Stepton jerked his head in assent. And so the acquaintance of these two men was begun. Their first conversation was a delight to the professor. After a short silence the curate said:

"I could not help seeing each time we have met how your attention was fastened upon me."

"Just so," rejoined Stepton, making no apology.

“And I really think,” continued Chichester, with a sort of pressure—“I really think I am entitled to ask for some explanation of the matter.”

“Certainly you are.”

“Well?” He paused, then said again, “Well, Professor Stepton?”

“I’m afraid I’ve nothing to tell you, I like to stick to facts.”

“I only ask you for facts.”

“The facts amount to very little. Coming from the museum I ran across a man. You were the man. My attention was riveted at once. I said to myself, ‘I must see that man again.’ Next day I took my chance. I had luck. You were there at pretty much the same hour.”

“I always come from St. Joseph’s—”

“Exactly. And so it’s happened on several days. And that’s all I have to tell you.”

“But surely you can indicate why—”

“No, I can’t. All I can say is that for some reason, quite inexplicable by me, if I had come upon you in a crowd of a thousand, I should have had to attend to you.”

“That’s very strange,” said Chichester, in a low voice; “very strange indeed.”

“There’s a reason for it, of course. There’s a reason for everything, but very often it isn’t found.” At this point the professor thrust his head toward Chichester, and added, “you can’t tell me the reason, I suppose?”

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Chichester looked much startled and taken aback.

"I—oh, no!"

"Then we must get along in the dark and make the best of it."

Having said this, the professor abruptly dismissed the subject and began to talk of other things. When he chose he could be almost charming. He chose on this occasion. And when at last he hailed a bus, declaring that he was due at home, Chichester expressed a hope that some day he would find himself in Horton Street, and visit number 4a.

The professor assented, and was carried westward.

Several days passed, but he did not find himself near Horton Street, and he had ceased to visit the South Kensington Museum. Then the curate wrote and invited him to tea. Despite a pretence at indifference in the phraseology of the note, the professor discovered a deep anxiety in the writing. Among other things he had studied, and minutely, graphology.

He sat down and very politely refused the invitation.

Then Chichester came to call on him, and caught him at home.

It was six o'clock in the evening, and the heavens were opened. Agnes, the Scotch parlor-maid who claimed to have second sight, opened the door to Chichester, who, speaking from beneath a dripping umbrella, inquired for the professor.

"He's in, sir, but he's busy."

"Could you take him my card?"

Agnes took it, much to her own surprise, and carried it to the professor's study.

"A gentleman, sir."

"I told you, Agnes—"

"I couldn't say no to him, sir."

"Why not? Here!" he took the card.

"Why not?" he repeated, when he had read the name.

"It wasn't in me to, sir."

“Well, then I shall have to see him. Show him up. But never again will I call you by the proud name of Cerberus.”

So, putting the onus upon Agnes, the professor yielded, murmuring to himself:

“It wasn’t in her to! Very expressive! And Cerberus, by the way, was always ready to let ’em in. It was when they wanted to get out that—Good evening. I hope you don’t mind climbing.”

“Thank you, no,” said Chichester.

“Sit down.”

“I am afraid I disturb you.”

“I’m bound to say you do. But what does it matter?”

“As you didn’t find your way to Hornton Street, I thought I would venture.”

“Very good of you. This is a soft chair.”

Chichester sat down. It had been evident to Stepton from the moment when his visitor came in that he was in great agony of mind. There was in his face a sort of still and abject misery which Stepton thought exceedingly promising. As he turned round, leaning his sharp elbow on his writing-table, Stepton was considering how to exploit this misery for the furthering of his purpose.

“I want you to tell me something,” Chichester began. “I want to know why your attention was first attracted to me. I feel sure that you must be able to give a reason. What is it?”

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"Well, now, I wish I could," returned Stepton.

To himself he gave the swift admonition, "Play for hysteria, and see what comes of it."

"I wish I could; but it's a mystery to me. But now—let's see."

He knitted his heavy brows.

"A long while ago I picked a man out, met him in a crowd, at the Crystal Palace, followed him about, couldn't get away from him. That same evening he was killed on the underground. I read of it in the paper, went to see the body, and there was my man."

"Do you claim to have some special faculty?" asked Chichester.

"Oh, dear, no. Besides, you haven't been killed on the underground—yet."

A curious expression that seemed mingled of disappointment and of contempt passed across Chichester's face. Stepton saw it and told himself, "No hysteria."

"Possibly the reason may be a more intellectual one," observed the professor. "I hear you have been preaching some very remarkable sermons. I haven't heard them. Still, others who have may have 'suggestioned' me. Three quarters of any man's fame, you know, are due to mere suggestion."

"You're not the man to be the prey of that, I fancy—not the easy prey, at any rate."

"Then we're left again with no explanation at all, unless, as I believe I hinted once before, you can give us one."

Chichester looked down; without raising his eyes he presently said in a constrained voice:

"If I were to give you one you might not accept it."

"Probably not," said Stepton, briskly. "In my life I've been offered a great many explanations, and I'm bound to say I've accepted remarkably few."

Chichester looked up quickly, and with the air of a man nettled.

"You'll forgive me, I hope, for saying that you scientific men very often seem to have a great contempt for those who are more mystically minded," he observed.

"I've hit the line!" thought Stepton, with a touch of exultation, as he dropped out a negligent, "Forgive you—of course."

"I dare say it seems to you extraordinary that any man should be able to be a clergyman, genuinely believing what he professes and what he preaches."

"Very few things seem to me extraordinary."

"Perhaps because you are skeptical of so much in which others believe."

"That may be it. Quite likely."

"And yet isn't there a saying of Newton's, 'A little science sends man far away from God, a great deal of science brings man back to God?' You'll forgive the apparent rudeness. All I mean is—"

"That the sooner I try to get more science the better for me," snapped out Stepton, brusquely interrupting his visitor, but without heat. "Let me tell you that I pass the greater part of my time in that very effort—to acquire more exact knowledge than I possess. Well—now then! Now then!"

Turning round still more toward the curate he looked almost as if he were about to "square up" to him. A dry aggressiveness informed him, and his voice had a rasping timbre as he continued:

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“But I decline to take leaps in the dark like—” Here he mentioned a well-known man of science—“and I decline to reject evidence like—” Here he named a professor even more famous.

The mention of the last name evidently excited Chichester’s curiosity.

“What evidence has he rejected?” he exclaimed.

“Last week he held a sitting to examine the pretensions of Mrs. Groeber, the German medium. Westcott was also present, a man on whose word the very devil—if there is such a person, which I don’t yet know—would rely. Some apparently remarkable phenomena occurred.—” Here he mentioned the professor—“was convinced that they could only have been brought about by supernormal means. Unfortunately, or fortunately, Westcott had seen the trickery which produced them. When the seance was over he explained what it was to ——. What did this *so-called* man of science do? Refused to accept Westcott’s evidence, clung to his own ridiculous belief,—savage’s fetish belief, nothing more,—and will include the Groeber manifestations as evidence of supernormal powers in his next volume. And I say, I say”—he raised his forefinger—“that clergymen are doing much the same thing pretty nearly every day of their lives. Seek for truth quietly, inexorably, and you may get it; but don’t prod men into falsehood, or try to, as you’ve been trying to in this very room.”

“I!” cried out Chichester.

“You. I told you I had no reason to give you as to why you attracted my attention in the street. Were you satisfied with that? Not at all. You must needs come here,—very glad to see you!—and say, ‘I feel sure you must be able to give me a reason. What is it?’ You clamor for a lie. And that’s what men are perpetually doing—clamoring for lies. And they get ‘em, from clergymen, from mediums, from so-called scientific men, and from the dear delightful politicians. There now!”

And the professor dropped his forefinger and flung himself back in his chair.

“And”—Chichester in his turn leaned forward, but he spoke with some hesitation—“and suppose I were to tell you a truth, a strange, an amazing truth?”

He paused.

“Go on!” said the professor.

“Wouldn’t you do just the opposite? You say men accept lies. I say you would probably reject truth.”

"Cela depend. What you believed to be truth might not be truth at all. It might be hysteria, it might be nervous dyspepsia, it might be overwork, it might be a dozen things."

"Just what I say," exclaimed Chichester. "Men of science delight in nothing so much as in finding excuses for rejecting the greatest truths."

"Do you mean the greatest truths in the possession of Anglican clergymen?"

"I dare say you think it impossible that a clergyman should know more than a scientific man?"

"Oh, no. But he's out for faith, and I happen to be out for facts. I like hard facts that can be set down with a fountain-pen in my note-book, and that, taken together, are convincing to all men of reasonable intellect. Very dull, no doubt; but there you have it. Clergymen, as a rule, move in what are called lofty regions—the realms of heart, conscience, and what not. Now, I'm very fond of the region of gray matter—gray matter."

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"And yet you are one of the chief of the investigators in the field of psychical research."

"Do you think there's no room for pencil and note-book there? What about Podmore,—there's a loss!—and a dozen others? Psychic matters have got to be lifted out of the hands of credulous fetish-worshiping fools, and the sooner the better."

"It's easy to call people credulous," said Chichester, with decided heat. "By being so readily contemptuous, Professor Stepton, you may often keep back evidence that might be of inestimable value to your cause. A man in possession of a great truth may keep it to himself for fear of being laughed at or called a liar."

"Then all I can say is that he's a coward—an arrant abject coward."

Chichester sat in silence. Again he was looking down. Now that his eyes were hidden by their drooping lids, and that he was no longer speaking, the sadness of his aspect seemed more profound. It dignified his rather insignificant features. It even seemed, in some mysterious way, to infuse power into his slight and unimportant figure. After sitting thus for perhaps three minutes he raised his head and got up from his chair.

"I must not take up your time any longer," he said. "It was very good of you to see me at all." He held out his hand, which Stepton took, and added, "I'll just say one thing."

"Do!"

"It isn't always cowardice which causes a man to keep a secret—a secret which might be of value to the world."

"I never said it was."

"No; but still—you spoke just now of my sermons. I preached one not very long ago which I have typed myself. If I send it to you do you think you could find time to read it?"

"Certainly."

"I will send it, then. Good night."

"I'll come down with you."

The professor let Chichester out. The rain was still falling in torrents. Shrouded in his mackintosh, protected by his umbrella, the curate walked away. Looking after him, Stepton thought:

"Very odd! It isn't only in the face. Even the figure, all covered up and umbrella-roofed, seems to have something—he'll send me the sermon of the man and his double to-morrow."

And on the morrow that sermon came by the first post. Having read it, the professor promptly returned it to Chichester with the following note:

The White House, Westminster.

Dear Mr. Chichester: _

Very glad to have had the opportunity of reading your interesting discourse. If I had not known it was yours, and a sermon, I should have said "a posthumous work of Robert Louis Stevenson." It does credit to your imagination. If you care to publish, I should suggest "The Cornhill." I know nothing about their terms.

Yours faithfully,

G.R.E. Stepton.

By return of post, there came an urgent invitation to the professor to visit Chichester's rooms in Hornton Street, "to continue a discussion which has a special interest for me at this moment."

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"Discussion!" thought Stepton, sitting down to accept, "What my man wants is for me to goad him into revelation; and I'll do it."

The professor knew enough of psychology to be aware that in the very depths of the human heart there is a desire which may perhaps be called socialistic—the desire to share truth with one's fellow-men. Chichester was scourged by this desire. But whether what he wished to share was truth, or only what he believed to be truth, was the question. Anyhow, Stepton was determined to make him speak. And he set off to Hornton Street little doubting that he would find means to carry his determination into effect.

He arrived about half-past five. He did not turn the corner into Kensington High Street on his homeward way until darkness had fallen, having passed through some of the most extraordinary moments that had ever been his.

When he was shown into the curate's sitting-room, his first remark was:

"Sent that very interesting story to 'The Cornhill' yet?"

"I don't think you quite understand, Professor," replied Chichester. "I did not type it with a view to sending it in anywhere for publication. You'll have tea with me, I hope? Here it is, all ready."

"Thank you."

"Oh, Ellen!"

Chichester went to the door, and Stepton heard the words, "Nobody, you understand," following on a subdued murmuring.

"And Mr. Harding, sir?" said the maid's voice outside.

"Mr. Harding won't come to-day. That will do, Ellen."

The professor heard steps descending. His host shut the door and returned.

"You typed it for your own use?" said Stepton.

"That sermon? Yes. I wished to keep it by me as a record."

He sat down, and poured out the tea.

"A record of an imagined experience. Exactly. Then why not publish?"

"It is not fiction."

“Well, it isn’t fact.”

The professor drank his tea, looking at his host narrowly over the cup.

“Do you say such an experience as that described in my sermon is impossible?”

“Do you say it is possible?”

“If I were to say so would you believe me?”

“Certainly not, unless I could make an investigation and personally satisfy myself that what you said was true. You wouldn’t expect anything else, I’m sure.”

“You can believe nothing on the mere word of another?”

“Very little. I am an investigator. I look for proof.”

“With your pencil in one hand, your note-book in the other.”

In Chichester’s last remark there was a note of sarcasm which thoroughly roused Stepton, for it sounded like the sarcasm of knowledge addressed to ignorance. Stepton had a temper. This touch of superiority, not vulgar, but very definite, fell on it like a lash.

“Now I’ll go for the reverend gentleman of St. Joseph’s!” he thought.

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And for a moment he forgot his aim in remembering himself. Afterward, in thinking matters over, he offered a pinch of incense at the altar of his egoism.

“So, the modern clergyman still believes in slip-slop, does he?” he exclaimed in his most aggressive manner. “Even now hasn’t he learnt the value of the matter-of-fact? The clergyman is the doctor of the soul, isn’t he? And the doctor, isn’t he the clergyman of the body? I wonder, I do wonder, how long the average doctor would keep together his practice if he worked with no more precision than the average clergyman. The contempt of the pencil and note-book! The contempt of proper care in getting together and coordinating facts! The contempt of proof—the appeal to reason! And so we get to the contempt of reason. And let me tell you—” he struck the tea-table with his lean hand till the curate’s cups jumped—“that scarcely ever have I heard a sermon in which was not to be found somewhere the preacher’s contempt for reason, the bread of the intellect of man.”

“The soul is not the intellect.”

“Don’t you think it higher?”

“I do.”

“And so you put it on slops!”

The professor got up from his chair, and began to sidle up and down the small room.

“You put it on slops, as if it were a thing with a disordered stomach. That’s your way of showing it respect. You approach the shrine with an offering of water gruel. Now look ye here!”—The professor paused beside the tea-table—“The soul wants its bread, depends upon it, as much as the body, and the church that is free with the loaves is the church to get a real hold on real men. Flummery is no good to anybody. Rhetoric’s no good to anybody. Claptrap and slipslop only make heads swim and stomachs turn. The pencil and note-book, observation and the taking down of it, these bring knowledge to the doors of men. And when you sneer at them, you sneer at bread, on the eating of which—or its equivalent, basis-nourishment—life depends.”

“I wonder whether you, and such as you, really know on what the true life of the soul depends,” said Chichester, with an almost dreadful quietness.

The professor sat down again.

“Such as I?” he said. “You are good enough to do me the honor of putting me in a class?”

“As you have so far honored me,” returned Chichester.

“Ha!” ejaculated Stepton.

He had quite got the better of his egoism, but he by no means regretted his outburst.

“Do you claim to stand outside the ranks of the clergy?” he asked.

“Do you claim to stand outside the ranks of the scientists?”

“Oh, dear, no. And now—you?”

Chichester said nothing for a moment. Then, lifting up his head, and gazing at the professor with a sort of sternness of determination, he said:

“Remember this! You yourself told me that in a crowd of a thousand you must have fixed your attention on me.”

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For a moment the professor had it in his mind to say that this statement of his had been a lie invented to make an impression on Chichester. But he resisted the temptation to score—and lose. He preferred not to score, and to win, if possible.

“I did,” he said.

“Could this be so if I were like other men, other clergymen?”

“Well, then, what is the mighty difference between you and your reverend brethren—between you, let us say, and your rector, Mr. Harding?”

Very casually and jerkily the professor threw out this question.

Not casually did Chichester receive it. He moved almost like a man who had been unexpectedly struck, then seemed to recover himself, and to nerve himself for some ordeal. Leaning forward, and holding the edge of the table with one hand, he said:

“How well do you know Mr. Harding?”

“Pretty well. Not intimately.”

“You have seen him since he—altered?”

“I saw him only the other day when I was at a specialist’s in Harley Street.”

“A specialist’s?”

“For nervous dyspepsia.”

Again the look of contempt flickered over Chichester’s face.

“Do you think the alteration in Mr. Harding may be due to nervous dyspepsia?”

“Probably. There are few maladies that so sap the self-confidence of a man.”

Chichester laughed.

For the first time since he had entered the little room the professor felt a cold sensation of creeping uneasiness.

“Apparently you don’t agree with me,” he said.

“I am not a doctor, and I know very little about that matter.”

“Then I’m bound to say I don’t know what you find to laugh at.”

"For a man who has spent so much time in psychical research you seem to have a rather material outlook upon—"

"Mr. Harding?"

"And all that he represents."

"Suppose we stick to Mr. Harding," said the professor, grittily. "He is typical enough, even if you are not."

"In what respect do you consider Mr. Harding typical?"

"I am speaking of the Harding before the fall into the abysses of nervous dyspepsia."

"Very well. In what respects was Mr. Harding typical?"

"In the sublime self-confidence with which he proclaimed as facts, things that have never been proved to be facts."

"Do men want facts?" said Chichester, almost as one speaking alone to himself.

"I do. I want nothing else. Possibly Mr. Harding had none to give me. I don't blame him."

"Perhaps it is a greater thing to give men faith than to give them facts."

"Give them the first by giving them the second, if you can! And that, by the way, is the last thing the average clergyman is able to do."

Chichester sat silent for nearly a minute looking at the professor with a strange expression, almost fiery, yet meditative, as if he were trying to appraise him, were weighing him in a balance.

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"Professor," he said at last, "I suppose your passion for facts has led men to put a great deal of faith in you. Hasn't it?"

"I dare say my word carries some weight. I really don't know," responded Stepton, with an odd hint of something like modesty.

"I had thought of Malling first," almost murmured Chichester.

"What's that about Malling?"

"I think he would have accepted what I have to give more readily than you would. There seems to me something in him which stretches out arms toward those things in which mystics believe. In you there seems to me something which would almost rather repel such things."

"I beg your pardon. I am quiescent. I neither seek to summon nor to repel."

"I couldn't tell Malling," said Chichester. "His readiness stopped me. It struck me like a blow."

"Malling prides himself on being severely neutral in mind."

"And you on being skeptical?"

"I await facts."

"Shall I give you some strange facts, the strangest perhaps you have ever met with?"

Stepton smiled dryly.

"You'll forgive me, but some such remark has been the prelude to so many figments."

"Figments?"

"Of the imagination."

An expression of anger—almost like a noble anger it seemed—transformed Chichester's face. It was as a fine wrath which looked down from a height, and in an instant it melted into pity.

"How much you must have missed because of your skepticism!" he said. "But I shall not let it affect me. You are a man of note-book and pencil. Will you promise me one thing? Will you give me your word not to share what I shall tell you with any one, unless, later on, I am willing that you should?"

"Oh, dear, yes!" said the professor.

And again he smiled. For even now he believed the curate to be wavering, swayed by conflicting emotions, and felt sure that a flick of the whip to his egoism would be likely to hasten the coming of what he, the professor, wanted.

A loud call rose up from the street. A wandering vender of something was crying his ware. In his voice was a sound of fierce melancholy. Chichester went to the window and shut it down.

"I wish it was night," he said as he turned.

The professor jerked out his watch.

"It must be getting late," he observed. "Past six! by Jove!"

He made an abrupt movement.

"What?" said Chichester. "You are going!"

He came up to the table.

"Sometimes I think," he said, "that men hate and dread nothing as they hate and dread facts which may upset the theories they cherish."

"You're perfectly right. Well, very glad to have seen you in your own room." The professor got up. "By their rooms shall ye know them." He glanced round.

"Ah, I see you have Rossetti's delightfully anemic Madonna, and Holman Hunt's 'Light of the World.' A day or two ago I was talking to a lady who pronounced that—" he extended his finger toward the Hunt—"the greatest work of art produced in the last hundred years. Her reason? Its comforting quality. I am sure you agree with her. Good-by."

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He made a sidling movement toward the door. Perhaps it was that movement which finally decided the curate to speak.

"Professor," he said, "I don't want you to go yet."

"Why not?" jerked out Stepton, with one hand on the door-knob.

"You collect 'cases.' I have a case for you. You are a skeptic: you say men should be brought to faith by facts. Sit down. I will give you some facts."

The professor came slowly back, looking dry and cold, and sat down by the table, facing the Rossetti Madonna.

"Always ready for facts," he said.

XI

"You have heard of doubles, of course, Professor?" said Chichester, leaning his arms on the table and putting his hands one against the other, as if making a physical effort to be very calm.

"Of course. There was an account of one in that sermon of yours."

"Have you ever seen a double?"

"No; not to my knowledge."

"I suppose you disbelieve in them?"

"I have no reason to believe in them. I have not collected enough evidence to convince me that there are such manifestations."

"You know a double at this moment."

"Do I, indeed? And may I ask the manifestation's name?"

"Marcus Harding."

"Marcus Harding is a double, you say. Whose?"

"Mine," said Chichester in a low voice.

He clasped and unclasped his hands.

"I don't understand you," said Stepton, rather disdainfully.



"I will try to make you." And Chichester began to speak, at first in a low, level voice. "That sermon of mine," he said, "was a sort of shadow of a truth that I wanted to reveal,—that I dared not fully reveal. Already I had tried to tell Evelyn Malling something of it. I had failed. When the moment came, when Malling was actually before me, I could not speak out. His mind was trying to track the truth that was in me. He got, as it were, upon the trail. Once he even struck into the truth. Then he went away to Marcus Harding. I remained in London. When I knew that those two were together I felt a sort of jealous fear of Malling. For there was pity in him. Despite his intense curiosity he had a capacity for pity. I realized that it might possibly interfere with—with something that I was doing. And I recalled Marcus Harding to London. From that moment I have avoided Malling. I could never tell him. But you, hard searcher after truth as you are—you could never find it in you to drag away another from the contemplation of truth. Could you? Could you?"

"Probably not," said Stepton. "I usually let folks alone even when they're glaring at falsehood. Ha!"

He settled himself in his chair, looking sidewise toward Chichester.

"You, like every one else, have noticed the tremendous change in Marcus Harding," Chichester went on. "That change, the whole of that change, is solely owing to me."

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"Very glad to have your explanation of that."

"I am going to give it you. The beginning of that change came about through the action of Marcus Harding. He wished for facts that are, perhaps,—indeed, probably,—withheld deliberately from the cognizance of man. You have sneered at those who live by faith, you have sneered at priests. Well, you can let that Marcus Harding go free of your sarcasm. Although a clergyman he was not a faithful man. And he wanted facts to convince him that there was a life beyond the grave. Henry Chichester—"

"You! You!" interjected Stepton, harshly.

"I, then, came into his life. He thought he would use me to further his purpose. He constrained me to sittings such as you have often taken part in, with a view to sending me into a trance and employing me, when in that condition, as a means of communication with the other world—if there was one. We sat secretly in this room, at this table."

"You need not give me ordinary details of your sittings," said the professor. "I am familiar with them, of course."

"Henry Chichester—"

"You! You! Don't complicate matters!"

"I never was entranced; but presently I felt myself changing subtly."

"People very often imagine they are developing into something wonderful at seances. Nothing new in that."

"Please try to realize the facts of my case without assuming that it resembles a thousand others. I believe, I feel sure, that it resembles no other case that has come under your observation. To grasp it you must grasp the characters of two men, Marcus Harding as he was—and myself, as I was."

"Put them before me, then."

"That Marcus Harding you knew. He was the type of the man who, sublimely self-confident, imposes his view of himself upon other men and especially upon women. He had strength—strength of body and strength of mind. And he had the strength which a devouring ambition sheds through a man. A fine type of the worldly clergyman he was, of the ardent climber up the ladder of preferment. To him the church was a career, and he meant to succeed in it. If he had to begin as a curate he meant to end as a bishop, perhaps as an archbishop. And he had will to help him, and vitality to help him, and the sort of talent that brings quick notice on a man. And he had also a woman to help him, his wife, Lady Sophia. He chose well when he chose her for his helpmate, though he

may not think so now. He should have been content with what he had. But he wanted more, and he thought he might perhaps get what he wanted through me. Marcus Harding was a full-blooded type of the clerical autocrat. I once was an equally complete type of the clerical slave—slave to conscience, slave to humble-mindedness, slave to my rector as soon as I knew him.

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“St. Francis of Assisi was the character I worshiped. I strove after simple goodness. I desired no glories of this world, no praises of men. I did not wish to be clever or to shine, but only to do my duty to my fellow-men, and so toward God. When I was first to make the acquaintance of Marcus Harding, with a view to becoming his senior curate if he thought fit, I felt some alarm. I had heard so much of his great energy and his remarkable talents. The day came. I paid my visit to Onslow Gardens. For the first time I saw—” Chichester paused. His face became distorted. He turned toward the window as if anxious to hide his face from the professor’s small, keen eyes. “I saw—that man,” he continued, in a withdrawn and husky voice, and still looking away.

Stepton sat motionless and silent, sidewise, with his arms hanging.

Chichester, after another long pause, again faced him.

“My very first impression was unfavorable. I attributed this to his great size, which had startled me. I now know I was wrong in thinking I took that impression from the outer man. It was the inner man who in that moment announced himself to me. But almost instantly he had surely withdrawn himself very far away, and I, then, had no means of following him. So he escaped from me, and I fell under the influence that Marcus Harding was able to exert at will.

“I was dominated. Buoyancy, life, energy, self-confidence, radiated from that man. He steeped me in his vigor. He seemed kind, cordial. He won my heart. My intellect, of course, was dazzled. But—he won my heart. And I felt not only, ‘Here is a man far greater than myself to whom I can look up,’ but also, ‘Here is a man to whom I must look up, because he is far better than myself.’ At that interview it was settled that I should become senior curate at St. Joseph’s.

“As you know, I became, and still am, senior curate. As I grew to know Marcus Harding better I admired him more. In fact, my feeling for him was something greater than admiration. I almost worshiped him. His will was law to me in everything. His slightest wish I regarded as a behest. His talents amazed me. But I thought him not only the cleverest, but the best of men. It seemed to me right that such a man should be autocratic. A beneficent autocracy became my ideal of government. That my rector’s will should be law to his wife, his servants, his curates, his organist, his choir, to those attached to his schools, to those who benefited by the charities he organized, seemed to me more than right and proper. I could have wished to see it law to all the world. If any one ventured to question any decision of his, or to speak a word against him, I felt almost hot with anger. In a word, I was at his feet, as the small and humble-minded man often is at the feet of the man who has talents and who is gifted with ambition and supreme self-confidence.

“For a long time this condition of things continued, and I was happy in it. Probably it might have continued till now, if—if that accursed idea had not come to Marcus Harding.”

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Again Chichester paused. In speaking he had evidently become gradually less aware of his companion's presence and personality. His subject had gripped him. Memory had grown warm within him. He lived in the days that were past.

"That accursed idea," he repeated slowly, "to use me as his tool in an endeavor to break down the barrier which divides men from the other world.

"As I told you, we began to sit secretly. Marcus Harding wished me to fall into the entranced condition. I did not know this at first, so at first I did not consciously resist his desire. He had told me a lie. He had told me that he desired only one thing in our sittings, to give to me something of the will power that made him a force in the world. He had declared that this was possible. I believed him unquestioningly. I thought he was trying to send some of his power into me. Soon I felt that he was succeeding in this supposed endeavor. Soon I felt that a strange new power was filtering into me."

Chichester fixed his eyes on Stepton as he said the last words, and seemed to emerge from his former condition of self-absorption.

"You have sat often. Have you ever felt such a sensation? It is like growth," he said.

"When one first begins to sit at seances, one is apt to imagine all sorts of things in the darkness," returned Stepton. "I dare say I did, like other folk."

"I understand," said Chichester, with a sort of strange condescension. "You think I was merely the victim of absurdity. The sense of this coming of power grew slowly, but steadily, within me. And presently it was complicated by another development, which involved—or began to involve, let me say at this point—my companion, Marcus Harding. I think I ought to tell you that in beginning the sittings I had had certain doubts, which were swept away by my admiration of, and faith in, my rector. Hitherto I had always thought that our human knowledge was deliberately limited by God, and that it was very wrong to strive to know too much. The man of science no doubt believes that it is impossible to know too much; but I have thought that many great truths are kept from us because we are not yet in a condition properly to understand them. I had, therefore, begun these practices with a certain tremor, and possibly a certain feeling of resistance, in the depths of my soul. As I felt the power coming to me I had put away my fears. They did not return. Yet surely the new development within me, of which I now became aware, was connected with those fears, however subtly. It was a sensation almost of hostility directed against Marcus Harding."

"Ah, now!" ejaculated the professor, as if in despite of himself. "And where's the connection you speak of?"

"Marcus Harding had constrained me to do a thing that in my soul I had believed to be wrong and that had roused my fear. As power dawned in me, directing itself upon

everything about me, it was instinctively hostile to him who had dominated me before I had any power, and who, by dominating me, had for a moment made me afraid.”

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"Retrospective enmity! Very well!" muttered the professor. "I understand you. Keep on!"

"This hostility—if I may call a feeling at first not very definite by so definite a name—induced in me a critical attitude of mind. I found myself, to my surprise, secretly criticizing the man whom till now I had regarded as altogether beyond the reach of criticism. I felt that Marcus Harding was giving me power. I was grateful to him for doing so; yet I began to see him in a new, and at moments an unpleasant light. Presently, after trying in vain to combat this novel sensation, which seemed to me almost treacherous, almost disloyal, I sought about for a reason, to give myself at least some justification for it. I sought, and one night it seemed to me that I found.

"On that night I was more than ever aware that strength of some kind was pouring into me. I had an almost heady sensation, such as one who drinks a generous wine may experience. When we rose from the table I told my rector so. He stared at me very strangely. Then he said: 'Good! Good! Didn't I tell you I would give you some of my power?' He paused. Then he added: 'It will come! It must come!' As he spoke the last words he frowned, and all his face seemed to harden, as if he were making a violent mental effort to which the body was obliged to respond. And at that instant I was aware that the reason Marcus Harding had given to me to persuade me to these sittings was not the true one, that his purpose was quite other than that which I had hitherto supposed it to be. I was suddenly aware of this, and I thought: 'I must already have been aware of it subconsciously, and that accounts for my sensation of hostility toward the rector.' A lie had been told to me. My new self-confidence resented this; and I said to myself, 'If Marcus Harding can tell a lie to me, who almost worshiped him, he must be an arrant hypocrite.'

"We sat again, and again I knew that there was something in the mind of my companion which he concealed from me, something to which I should strongly object if I knew what it was, something which troubled the atmosphere, the mental atmosphere, of the sitting. Instead of being in accord, we were engaged in a silent, but violent, struggle. I was determined not to be overcome. A sort of fierce desire for tyranny sprang up in me. I longed to see Marcus Harding at my feet.

"Again and again we sat. My hostile feeling grew. My critical feeling grew. My longing to tyrannize increased, till I was almost afraid of it, so cruel did I feel it to be. 'Down! Down under my feet!' That was what my soul was secretly saying now to the man whose will had been as law to me. And one night, as if he heard that ugly voice of my soul, he abruptly got up from the table and said: 'It seems to me that you and I are not *en rapport*. It seems to me that no more good can come of these sittings. We had better not sit again.'

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"We must sit again," I replied.

"Marcus Harding turned scarlet with anger. He looked at me. He opened his lips to speak. I let him speak. I even argued the question with him. I pointed out to him that his only design—the only design acknowledged by him, at any rate, in beginning these practices—had been to give me strength such as, he had declared to me, he himself had drawn while at Oxford from a Hindu comrade. In carrying out this design, I now told him, he was being successful. I felt that I was growing in power of will, in self-confidence. How, then, could he refuse to continue when success was already in sight? 'Unless,' I concluded, 'you had some other design in persuading me to sit, which I did in the first instance against my secret desire, and you feel that there is now no probability of carrying that design into effect.'

"He gave in. I had him beaten. Hastily he muttered a good-night and left me. I let him out into the night. As soon as the street door had shut on him I ran upstairs. I went to that window,—” Chichester flung out his hand—"pushed it up, leaned out, and watched him down the street. I saw him pass under a gas-lamp and I said to myself: 'You have submitted to my will, and you shall submit again. I am the master now.'

"In that moment all the domination which I had so joyously endured, which I had even surely reveled in,—for there are those who can revel in their slavery,—abruptly became in my mind a reason for revenge. Marcus Harding disappeared in the night; but still I leaned out, staring down the way he had gone, and thinking, 'You shall pay me back for it. You shall pay me back.'

"From that night I made no effort to check the critical faculty, the exercise of which at first had seemed to me a sort of treachery. And as I let myself criticize, I saw more clearly. The scales fell from my eyes. I realized that I had been nothing less than blind in regard to Marcus Harding. I saw him now as he was, a victim of egomania, a worldling, tyrannical, falsely sentimental, and unfaithful steward, a liar—perhaps even an unbeliever. His whole desire—I knew it now—was not to be good, but to be successful. His charity, his pity for the poor, his generosity, his care for his church, for his schools—all was pretence. I saw Marcus Harding as he was. And what followed?"

Chichester leaned forward to the professor.

"Fear followed," he said in a withdrawn voice.

"Fear!" said Stepton, clearing his throat with a loud, rasping noise.

"Whenever I was with Marcus Harding in any public place I was now companioned by fear. I dreaded unspeakably lest others should begin to see what I saw. When he preached, I could hardly sit to listen: I felt as if any shame falling upon him would

overwhelm me also. I strove in vain to combat this strange, this, then, inexplicable sensation. With every sitting this terror grew upon me. It tortured

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me. It obsessed me. It drove me into action. When I was with my rector, I tried perpetually to prevent him from exposing his true self to the world, by changing the conversation, by attenuating his remarks, by covering up his actions with my own, sometimes even by a brusque interruption. But in the pulpit he escaped from me. I was forced to sit silent and to listen while he preached doctrine in which he had no belief, and put forward theories of salvation, redemption by faith, and the like, which meant less than nothing to him. Finding this presently unendurable by me, I strove to govern him mentally when he was in the pulpit, to track him, as it were, with my mind, to head him off with my mind when he was beginning to take the wrong path.”

“Did you succeed in that effort?” interrupted the professor.

“I made an impression, a terrible impression, upon him. I almost broke him down. I sapped his self-confidence. His power as a preacher deserted him, as his power outside the pulpit deserted him. With every day I felt that I saw more clearly into every recess, every cranny, of his mind and nature. Just at first this frightfully clear sight was mine only when we were sitting; but presently it was mine whenever I was with him. And he knew it, and went in fear of me. Gradually, very gradually, it came about that our former positions were reversed; for as he sank down in the human scale, I mounted. As he lost in power, I gained. And especially in the pulpit I felt that now I had force, that I could grip my hearers, could make a mighty impression upon those with whom I was brought into contact.

“But I must tell you that now I gained no satisfaction from my own improvement, if so it may be called. My whole life was vitiated by my secret terror lest Marcus Harding should be found out, should ever be known for what he was. His actions, and even his thoughts, affected me with an intimacy that was inexplicable.”

“You were in telepathic communication with him!” interjected Stepton.

“Call it so if you like. Often I felt what he was thinking, almost as if each thought of his were a hand laid upon me—a hand from which I shrank with an almost trembling repugnance. Sometimes when he thought something contemptible or evil, I shrank as if from a blow.

“There was a link between us. Presently, soon, I knew it. We seemed in some dreadful way to belong to each other, so that whatever was thought, said, done by him, whatever happened to him, reacted upon me.

“At this time Lady Sophia Harding hated me with a deadly hatred. Formerly she had been indifferent to me. Concentrated upon her husband, adoring him, vain of him, greedily ambitious for his advancement, she had had no time to bestow on a clerical

nonentity. But as I grew to understand what her husband really was she grew to hate me. She was almost rude to me. She spoke ill of me behind my back. She even tried to oust me from my position as senior curate of St. Joseph's. Why did not she succeed? Are you thinking that?"

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"Well, what if I was?" snapped the professor, moving in his chair.

"Marcus Harding could not make a move to get rid of me. There was a link between us which he could not even try to break.

"One night—one night—I discovered what that link was."

It was growing dark in the room. The Rossetti Madonna, thin, anemic, with hanging hair, seemed fading away on the somber, green wall. The window-panes looked spectral and white. The faint murmur of the city sounded a little deeper and much sadder than in the light of day. Stepton was aware of a furtive but strong desire for artificial light in the room, but he did not choose to mention it. And Chichester, whose voice—so it seemed to his hearer—began to have that peculiar almost alarming timbre which belongs to a voice speaking not for the ears of another, but for the satisfaction only of the soul which it expresses, continued his narrative, or confession, as if unaware of the dying of day.

"During the day which preceded it I had been haunted by the thought of myself doing what Marcus Harding could not do. Why should not I of my own will leave St. Joseph's, get away from this dreadful contemplation which obsessed me, from this continual anxiety—almost amounting to terror at moments—which gnawed me? Why should not I break this mysterious link, impalpable yet strong? If I did, should I not again find peace? But my sittings with Marcus Harding would be at an end. Could I give them up? I asked myself that, and I felt as if I could not. Through them, by means of them, I felt as if I might attain to something wonderful—terrible perhaps, but wonderful. I felt as if I were approaching the threshold of absolute truth. A voice within me whispered, 'Go no further.' Was it the voice of conscience? I did not heed it. Something irresistible urged me forward. I thrust away from me with a sort of crude mental violence the haunting thought. And when the darkness came I greeted it.

"For he came with the darkness."

On the wall opposite to the professor the thin Madonna faded away.

"As I heard his heavy step on the stairs that night I said to myself, 'At all hazards I will see, I will know, more. I will see, I will know—all.' When he entered at that door"—a thin darkness moved in the darkness as Chichester pointed—"he was dreadfully white and looked sad, almost terrified. He suggested that we should break through our plan and not sit. I refused. He then said he wished to sit in light. I refused. He was become my creature. He dared not disobey my desires! We placed our hands on this table, not touching. I could no longer endure the touch of his hand. We remained motionless. A long time passed. There were no rappings. A strange deadness seemed to prevail in the room. Presently it faded away, and I had the sensation that I was sitting quite alone.

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"At first it seemed to me that my companion must have crept out of the room silently, leaving me by myself in the darkness. I shuddered at the thought that I was alone. But then I said to myself that Marcus Harding must be there in the blackness opposite to me, and I moved my hands furtively on the table, thinking to prove his presence to myself by touch. I did not prove it. Suddenly I had no need to touch him in order to know that he was there."

"Why not?" said the professor, and started at the sound of his own voice in the little room.

"Something made me realize that he was still within the room. Nevertheless, I felt that I was alone. How could that be? I asked myself that question. This answer came as it were sluggishly into my mind, 'You are alone not because Marcus Harding is away, but because Henry Chichester is away.' For a long while I sat there stagnantly dwelling on this knowledge which had come to me in the blackness. It was as if I knew without understanding, as a man may know he is involved in a catastrophe without realizing how it has affected his own fate. And then slowly there came to me, or grew in me, an understanding of how I was alone. I was alone with Marcus Harding at that moment because I was Marcus Harding. A shutter seemed to slide back softly, and for the first time I, Marcus Harding, stared upon myself out of the body of another man, of Henry Chichester. I was alone with my soul double. Motionless, silent, I gazed upon it. Now I understood why I had been tortured with anxiety lest the world should learn to comprehend Marcus Harding as I comprehended him. Now I understood why neither he nor I had been able to break that mysterious link which our sittings had forged between us. I had been trying ignorantly to protect myself, to conceal my own shortcomings, to cover my own nakedness. I had sweated with fear lest my own truth should be discovered by all those to whom for so many years I had been presenting a lie. Yes, I had sweated with fear; but even then how little I had known! A voice cried out suddenly, 'Turn on the light!' It was the voice of my double. It seemed to awake, or to recall perhaps,—how can I say?—Henry Chichester. I was aware of a shock; it seemed strongly physical. I got up at once and turned the light on. Marcus Harding was before me, trembling, ashen. 'What is it? What has happened?' he said in a broken voice. I made no reply. He left me. I heard his step in the street—out there!"

Chichester was silent. The professor said nothing for a moment, but passed his tongue twice over his lips and swallowed, sighing immediately afterward.

"Transferred personality!" he muttered—"transferred personality. Is that what you'd have me believe?"

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"I'll tell you the rest. When Marcus Harding's steps died away down the street I remained here. Since that shock I have spoken of, I felt that I was again Henry Chichester, changed, as I had long been changed—charged with new force, new knowledge, new discrimination, new power over others, gifted with a penetrating vision into the very soul of the man I had worshiped, yet Henry Chichester. And as Henry Chichester I suffered; I condemned myself. This I said to myself that night, 'I was determined to see. I disregarded the voice within me which warned me that I was treading a forbidden path. God has punished me. He has allowed me to see. But this shall be the end. I will never sit again. I will give up my curacy. I will leave St. Joseph's at once. Never more will I set eyes on Marcus Harding.' I was in a condition of fierce excitement—"

"Ah, exactly," muttered the professor, almost as if consoled—"fierce excitement!"

"I could not think of sleep. For a long time I remained in here, sitting, standing, pacing, opening books; I scarcely know what I did or did not do. At last a sensation of terrible exhaustion crept over me. I undressed. I threw myself on my bed. I tried to sleep. I turned, shifted, got up, let in more air, again lay down, lay resolutely still in the dark, tried not to think. But always my mind dwelt on that matter. In those few frightful moments what had become of myself, of Henry Chichester? Had the powerful personality of that man whom once I had almost worshiped thrust him away, submerged him, stricken him down in a sort of deathlike trance? What I had seen I remembered now as Henry Chichester. What I had known in those moments I still knew now as Henry Chichester. In vain I revolved this matter in my feverish mind. It was too much for me. I was in deep waters.

"I closed my eyes. The fatigue wrapped me more closely. Sleep at last was surely drawing near. But suddenly I knew—how I cannot exactly say—that once more the shutter was to be drawn back for me. This knowledge resembled a horrible physical sensation. The entry of it into my mind, or indeed into my very soul, was as the dawning of a dreadful and unnatural pain in the body. This pain increased till it became agony. Although I still lay motionless, I felt like one involved in a furious struggle in which the whole sum of me took violent part. And there came to me the simile of a man seized by tremendous hands, and held before a window opening into a room in which something frightful was about to take place. And the shutter slipped back from the window.

"Again I looked upon myself. That was my exact sensation. The shutter drawn back, I assisted at the spectacle of Marcus Harding's life. And it was my life. I knew with such frightful intimacy that my knowledge was as vision. Therefore, I say, I saw. Not only my spirit seemed to be gazing, but also my bodily eyes.

"I saw myself in the night slowly approaching my house in Onslow Gardens, ashen pale, shaken, terrified. At a corner I passed a policeman. He knew me and saluted me with

respect. I made no gesture in response. He stared at me in surprise. Then a smile came into his face—the smile of a man who is suddenly able to think much less of another than he thought before. I left him smiling thus, reached my house, and stood before it.

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"Now I must tell you, and I rely absolutely on your regarding this as said in the strictest, most inviolable confidence—"

"Certainly. Word of honor, and so forth!" said the professor, quickly and sharply.

"I must tell you that Marcus Harding is a sinner, and not merely in the sense in which all men are sinners. There have been recurring moments in his life when he has committed actions which, if publicly known, would ruin him in the eyes of the world and put an end to his career. As I looked at myself standing before my house, I saw that I was hesitating whether to go in with my misery, or whether to seek for it the hideous alleviation of my beloved sin.

"Professor,"—it seemed to Stepton at this moment as if Chichester's voice loomed upon him out of the darkness by which they were now enshrouded,—"it has been said that nothing shocks a man so terribly as the sight of his body-double; that to see what appears to be himself, even if only standing at a window or sitting before a fire, causes in a man a physical horror which seems to strike to the very roots of his physical being. I looked now upon my soul-double, piercing the fleshly envelop and it was my very soul that sweated and turned cold. For I perceived the dreadful action which, if known, would certainly ruin me, being committed by the spirit. The slavish body had not yet bowed down and done its part; but it was about to obey the impulse of the spirit. Slowly the body turned away from its home. The spirit was driving it. The demon with the whip was at work in the night. I looked till the dawn came. And only when at last my double crept, like a thief, into its house, did sleep take me for a little while—sleep that was alive with nightmare."

Chichester was silent. The professor heard him breathing quickly, saw him, almost as a shadow just shown by the faint light that entered from the street through the two small windows, clasp and unclasp his hands, touch his forehead, his eyelids, move in his chair, like a man profoundly stirred and unable to be at ease.

"When I woke," he continued, after a long pause, which the professor did not break by a word or a movement, "I woke to combat. As I told you, I had resolved at once to resign my curacy, and never to see that man again. In the light of the morning I sat down to write my letter of resignation; but I could not do it. A fearful compulsion to remain was upon me. I wrote a few words. I stopped, tore the note up, began again. But writing was impossible. Then I resolved to visit Marcus Harding and to tell him that I must go. I went to his house. He was at home. When I saw him I told him that I wished him to sit again that night. He strove to refuse. He did not understand the truth, but he was terrified. I ordered him to come to my rooms that night, and left him. As I was going away I met Lady Sophia. To my amazement, she stopped me, spoke to me kindly, even more than kindly, looked at me with an expression

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in her eyes that almost frightened me. I said to myself, 'But those are a slave's eyes!' as I left her. Never before had any woman looked at me like that. In that moment, I think, she began to turn from him toward me, to forsake weakness for strength. Yes, I say strength. I was rent by the tumult within me, but I had strength. I have it now. For, despite his hypocrisy, his unbelief, his active sinning, Marcus Harding had been a strong man. And even Henry Chichester, with all his humbleness, his readiness to yield to others, to think nothing of himself, had had the strength that belongs to purity of soul. And then there is the strength the soul draws from looking upon truth. There was strength, there is now, for the woman to follow. And instinct has surely guided her. She does not, she cannot know. And yet instinct sends her in search of the strength."

"What do you mean by that? What do you claim?"

"You read that sermon?"

"I did."

"Don't you understand? I am that man at the window. He did not flee away. He could not. He was, he is, compelled to remain. He watches that dreadful life. And the other within the room is fading. The strength, the authority, the power, are coming to me. Every sitting broadens that bridge across which the deserters are passing. When I preached that sermon my congregation sat as if numbed by terror. And he in the choir listened, never moving. I saw his spirit, dazed, stretching out to grasp the truth, slipping back powerless to do it. It was like a thing moving through the gloom of deep waters—of deep, deep waters."

Again Chichester's voice died away. In the silence that followed the professor heard the faint ticking of a clock. He had not noticed it before. He could not tell now whether it came from within the room or from the room behind the folding-doors. It seemed to him as if this ticking destroyed his power to think clearly, as if it threw his brain into an unwonted confusion which made him feel strangely powerless. He was aware of a great uneasiness approaching, if not actually amounting to fear. This uneasiness made him long for light. Yet he knew that he dreaded light; for he was aware of an almost unconquerable reluctance to look upon the face of his companion. Beset by conflicting desires, therefore, and the prey of unwonted emotion, he sat like one paralyzed, listening always to the faint ticking of the clock, and striving to reduce what was almost like chaos to order in his brain.

"Why have you selected me to be the hearer of this—this very extraordinary statement?" he forced himself at length to say prosaically. The sound of his own dry voice somewhat reassured him, and he added: "Though there is nothing very extraordinary in the facts you have related. Telepathic communication between one

mind and another is a commonplace of to-day, an old story. Every one of course accepts it as possible. What novelty do you claim to present to startle science?"

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"I say that telepathy does not explain the link between Marcus Harding and myself."

The professor struck his hand on the table. It seemed to him that if only he could get into an argument this strange confusion and fear might leave him. He would be on familiar ground.

"What you call vision might be merely mind-reading, what you call perceiving the action of the spirit, mind-reading. Your terror lest others should find out bad truths about Marcus Harding would spring naturally enough from your lingering regard for him. Your acute anxiety when he is preaching arises of course from the fact that, owing to bodily causes, no doubt, his mental powers are failing him, and he is no longer able to do himself justice."

"You don't understand. What I desired in our sittings was to draw into myself strength, power, will from—him. What have I done? I have drawn into myself the very man. That night when the shutter slipped back he looked out from the body of Henry Chichester. His mind worked, his soul was alive, within the cage of another man. And meanwhile Henry Chichester lay as if submerged, but presently stirred, and, however feebly, lived again. He lives now. But not from him comes my frightful comprehension of Marcus Harding. Not him does Marcus Harding fear. Not to him does she, the woman, look with the eyes of a slave. It is not he who dominates the crowds in St. Joseph's. It is not he who conceived that sermon of the man and his double. It is not he who has sometimes been terribly afraid."

"Afraid! Afraid!"

"There have been moments when I have been moved to snatch my double out of the sight of men. That day when we met Evelyn Malling I feared as I left them alone together; and when I found Malling intimately there in that house, I felt like one coming upon an ambush which might be destructive of his safety. My instinct was to detach Malling from my double, to attach him to myself. My conduct startled him. I saw that plainly. Yet I tried to win him over, as it were, to my side. He came to me. I strove to tell him, but something secret prevented me. And how could he assist me?"

Chichester got up from the table. The professor saw a darkness moving as he went to stand by the empty fireplace.

"I must look on truth," he continued; "I have to. The fascination of staring upon the truth of oneself is deadly, but it surpasses all other fascination. He sins more often now. I watch him sin. Sometimes under my contemplation I see him writhing like a thing in a trap—the semblance of myself. How the woman despises him now! Sometimes I feel deeply sad at my own ruthlessness. It is frightful to contemplate the physical wreck of a being whom, in some strange and hideous way, one always feels to be oneself. When I

look at him it is as if his fallen face, his hanging nerveless hands, his down-drooping figure and eyes lit with despair were mine. His poses, his gestures, his physical

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tricks, they are all mine. I watch them with a cold, enveloping disgust, frozen in criticism of everything he does, anticipating every movement, every look, hating it when it comes, because it is bred out of the remnant of a spirit I despise as no man surely has ever despised before. Henry Chichester would pity, but he is overborne. He is in me as a drop may be in the ocean. I am most aware of him when my double sins. Only last night we sat”—Chichester came back to the table, and stood there, very faintly relieved against the darkness by the dim light which penetrated through the windows—“we sat in the darkness, and more deeply than ever before I went down into the darkness. I felt as if I were penetrating into the last recesses of a ruined temple. And there, in the ultimate chamber crouched all that was left of the inmate, terrified, helpless, and ignorant. As I looked upon him I understood why man is never permitted really to know himself unless, in an access of mad folly and overweening pride, he succeeds in crossing the boundary which to pass is sheer wickedness. And I tried to turn away, but I could not—I could not. I made a supreme effort. It was in vain.

“I saw him go home. At last he was sick of his sin. There rose within him that strange longing for goodness, for purity and rest, that terrible, aching desire to be what those who once loved him for long had thought him to be, which perhaps never dies in the soul of a human being. Is it the instinct of the Creator burning like an undying spark in the created? And, as he drew near to his house, there came to him the resolve to speak, to acknowledge, to say, ‘This is what I am. Know me as I am! Care for me still, in spite of what I am!’ He went in, and sought her—the woman. She was alone. Sleep had not come to her. Perhaps some instinct had told her she must wake and be ready for something. Then he gathered together the little that was left to him of courage, and he strove to tell her, to make her understand some of the truth, to obtain from her the greatest of human gifts—the love of one from whom a man has no secrets that he can tell.

“She listened for a moment, then she thrust out her hands as if to push the truth of him out of her life. And last night she left him—going in fear of him.”

The professor shook his narrow shoulders, and sprang abruptly to his feet. The ticking of the clock now sounded almost like a hammer beating in his ears.

“It’s time we had some light,” he said in rather a loud voice.

The darkness that was Chichester moved. A gleam of light shone in the little room, revealing the thin Madonna, “The Light of the World,” the piano, the neatly bound books of the curate of St. Joseph’s; revealing Chichester, who now stood facing the professor, white, drawn, lined, but with eyes full of almost hideous resolution and power.

“I advise,” said the professor—“I advise you from this time forward—”

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He stared into the eyes of the man opposite to him, and his voice died away in his throat.

When, immediately afterward, he found himself walking hurriedly toward Kensington High Street the sweat was pouring down his face.

XII

One night of that autumn, driven by an overmastering impulse, Evelyn Malling set out toward Kensington. He felt that he must know something more of the matter between Marcus Harding and Henry Chichester. Stepton still kept silence. Malling had not approached him. But why should he not call upon Chichester, an acquaintance, almost a friend? It was true that he had resolved, having put the affair into Stepton's hands, to wait. It had come to this, then, to-night that he could be patient no longer? As he stood at the corner of Hornton Street, he asked himself that question. He drew out his watch. It was already past eleven, an unholy hour for an unannounced visit. But slowly he turned into Hornton Street, slowly went down that quiet thoroughfare till he was opposite to the windows of the curate's sitting-room. A light shone in one of them. The rest of the house was dark. Even the fanlight above the small front door displayed no yellow gleam. No doubt the household had retired to rest and Henry Chichester was sitting up alone. A rap would probably bring him down to open to his nocturnal visitor. But now Malling bethought himself seriously of the lateness of the hour, and paced slowly up and down, considering whether to seek speech of the curate or to abandon that idea and return to Cadogan Square. As in his mental debate he paused once more opposite to the solitary gleam in the first-floor window, an incident occurred which startled him, and gave a new bent to his thoughts. It was this: The light in the window was obscured for a moment as if by some solid body passing before it. Then the window was violently thrown up, the large figure of a man, only vaguely perceived by Malling, appeared at it, and a choking sound dropped out into the night. The man seemed to be leaning out as if in an effort to fill his lungs with air, or to obtain the relief of the cool night wind for his distracted nerves. His attitude struck Malling as peculiar and desperate. Suddenly he moved. The light showed, and Malling saw for an instant a second figure, small, slight, commanding. The big man seemed to be sucked back toward the center of the room. Down came the window; the tranquil gleam of the light shone as before; then abruptly all was dark.

Malling realized at once what was happening in the curate's lodgings. As he paused, gazing at the dark house, he knew that the miserable Marcus Harding was within, constrained to endure the observation which, to use his own hideous but poignant phrase, was "eating him away." It was he who had appeared at the window, like a tortured being endeavoring to escape into the freedom of the night. It was Henry Chichester who had followed him, who had drawn him back, who had plunged him into darkness.

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The street was deserted. No policeman passed, regarding him with suspicion, and Mailing went on sentinel duty. The dark house fascinated him. More than once a desire came to him to make an effort for the release of Marcus Harding, to cross the street and to hammer brutally at the green door. He recalled Henry Chichester's strange sermon, and he felt as if he assisted at the torture of the double, which he himself had imaginatively suggested to the two clergymen in Lady Sophia's drawing-room. Ought he not to interrupt such a torture?

Midnight struck, and he had not knocked. One o'clock struck; he had paced the street, but had never gone out of sight of the curate's door. It was nearly two, and Mailing was not far from the High Street end of the thoroughfare when he heard a door bang. He turned sharply. A heavy uncertain footstep rang on the pavement. Out of the darkness emerged a tall figure with bowed head. As it moved slowly forward once or twice it swayed, and a wavering arm shot out as if seeking for some support. Mailing stood where he was till he saw the broad ghastliness of Marcus Harding's white face show under the ray of a lamp. He discerned no eyes. The eyes of the unhappy man seemed sunken out of recognition in the dreadful whiteness of his countenance. The gait was that of one who believes himself dogged, and who tries to slink furtively, but who has partly lost control of his bodily powers, and who starts in terror at his own too heavy and sounding footfalls.

This figure went by Mailing, and was lost in the lighted emptiness of the High Street. Mailing did not follow it. Now he had a great desire, born out of his inmost humanity, to speak with Henry Chichester. He made up his mind to return to the curate's door: if he saw a light to knock and ask for admittance; if the window was dark to go on his way. He retraced his steps, looked up, and saw a light. Then it was to be. That man and he were to speak together. But as he looked, the light was extinguished. Nevertheless he struck upon the door.

No one answered. He struck again, then stepped back into the roadway, and looked up at Chichester's window. The curate must surely have heard. Yes, for even as Mailing gazed the window moved. No light appeared. But after a pause a voice above said:

"Is that you, Mr. Harding?"

The dim figure of a man was apparent, standing a little back and half concealed by a darkness of drooping curtains.

"It is I—Evelyn Mailing," said Mailing.

The form at the window started.

"Mr. Mailing!" the words came uncertainly. "What is it? Has—has anything happened to—why do you want me at such an hour?"

"I chanced to be in your street and saw your light. I thought I would give you a hail."

"Do you mean that you want to come in?"

After a short pause Malling answered, "Yes."

"I cannot let you in!" the voice above cried out lamentably.

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Then the window was shut very softly.

* * * * *

Three days later Malling saw in the papers the news of the complete breakdown of Marcus Harding. "Nervous prostration," was the name given by the doctors to his malady, and it was announced that he had been ordered to take a sea voyage, and was preparing to start for Australia with a nurse.

Soon afterward Malling was walking in the afternoon down Pall Mall, wondering deeply what would happen, whether the rector would ever start on that voyage, when he came upon Professor Stepton sidling out of the Athenaeum.

"Heard about Harding?" jerked out the professor.

"Yes. Has he sailed for Australia?"

"Dead. Died at half-past three o'clock this morning."

Malling turned cold.

"Poor fellow!" he said. "Poor fellow!"

The professor was drawing his plaid shawl round his shoulders. When it was properly adjusted, he began to walk on. Malling kept almost mechanically beside him.

"Did you expect this?" Malling asked.

"Well, I knew he was failing."

"And Chichester? Have you seen Chichester since his death?"

"No. Would you like to see him for me?"

Malling was deep in thought and did not answer.

"Do you think?" said the professor, "that Henry Chichester will be greatly affected by this death?"

"Affected? Do you mean by grief?"

"Yes."

"I should suppose that to be highly improbable."

The professor shot a very sharp glance at Malling.

"I'm not sure that I agree with you," he observed dryly.

"Have you seen him lately?" asked Malling.

"Not quite recently. But if I had seen him, say, yesterday, I don't think that would greatly affect my present dubiety. I should, however, like to set that dubiety at rest. Are you busy to-day?"

"No."

"I am. Will you make a little investigation for me? Will you go and pay a visit of condolence to Chichester on the death of his rector, and then come round to the White House and report?"

"I will if you wish it."

"I shall be in after seven."

"Very well."

"I dare say you will be surprised," observed Stepton. "I see my bus."

Malling left him imperatively waving his arm, and, turning, walked toward Kensington.

What were his expectations? He did not know. Stepton had upset his mind. As he went on slowly he strove to regain his mental equilibrium. But he could not decide exactly what Stepton had meant. He felt inferior to the professor as he turned into Hornton Street.

He did not hesitate, but went at once to the curate's door and rapped. No one answered. He rapped again, and touched the bell, half hoping, even while he did so, that there was no one within to hear.

But an inquiring head appeared in the area, observed, and was sharply withdrawn. Steps sounded in the passage, and the maid Ellen presented herself, looking somewhat disordered.

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"Yes, sir?" she said.

"Is Mr. Chichester at home?"

"He is in, sir, poor gentleman," replied the maid. "Did you want to see him?"

"Yes."

"I'm sure I don't know whether he will see you, sir."

"Is he ill?"

"Not to say ill, sir. But haven't you heard?"

"What?"

"His poor rector's gone, sir, what used to come here to visit him so regular. I never see a gentleman in such a way. Why, he's so changed I don't hardly know him."

"Have you been here long?" said Mailing, abruptly.

"Only six months, sir."

The maid began to look rather astonished.

"And so Mr. Chichester is quite altered by his grief?"

"You never did, sir! He was so firm, wasn't he, above every one! Even his rector used to look to him and be guided by him. And now he's as gentle and weak almost as a new-born child, as they say."

Mailing thought of Stepton. Had he looked forward to some such change?

"Perhaps I could console Mr. Chichester in his grief," he said. "Will you take him this card and ask if I can see him? I knew Mr. Harding, too. I might be of use, possibly."

"I'll ask him, sir. He's laying down on the bed, I do believe."

Ellen hurried up-stairs with the card. It seemed to Mailing that she was away for a long time. At last she returned.

"If you please, sir, Mr. Chichester wants to know if it's anything important. He's feeling very bad, poor gentleman. But of course if it's anything important, he wouldn't for all the world say no."

"It is important."

"Then I was to ask you to walk in, sir, please."

Chichester's sitting-room was empty when Malling came into it, and the folding-doors between it and the bedroom were shut. Ellen went away, and Malling heard a faint murmur of voices, and then Ellen's footstep retreating down the stairs. Silence followed. He waited, at first standing. Then he sat down near the piano. Not a sound reached him from the bedroom. On the curate's table lay a book. Malling took it up. The title was "God's Will be Done." The author was a well-known high-church divine, Father Rowton. To him, then, Henry Chichester betook himself for comfort. The piano stood open. On it was music. Malling looked and saw, "Oh, for the wings, for the wings of a dove!" by Mendelssohn. The little room seemed full of pious orthodoxy. Surely its atmosphere was utterly changed since Malling last was in it. The melody of "Oh, for the wings!" went through his brain. That the Henry Chichester he had recently known, that cruel searcher after and expounder of truth, that he should be helped by those words, by that melody, in an hour of sorrow!

There was a movement in the bedroom. The folding-doors opened inward, and the curate appeared. He was very pale, and looked really ill. His face had fallen in. His fair hair was slightly disordered, and his blue eyes were surrounded by red rims. His expression suggested that he had recently undergone an extremely violent shock, which had shaken badly both body and mind. He looked dazed. Coming forward feebly, he held out his hand.

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"I believe it is something important," he said in a gentle, rather wavering voice; "otherwise—I am hardly fit, I fear, to be with my kind. I"—He sat down—"I have had a terrible shock, Mr. Malling. You have heard?"

"You mean Mr. Harding's death?"

"Yes."

"I have just heard of it."

"It occurred at half-past three o'clock last night, or, rather, this morning. He had been declining for a long while. At the last he just faded out, as it were. The strange thing is that I knew the exact moment when he entered into rest."

"You weren't with him?"

"Oh, no. I was here, asleep. But at three o'clock I awoke. I felt violently agitated. I can scarcely describe the sensation. It was as if I was torn, as if mind and body, or spirit and body, were torn, lacerated. I suffered the greatest conceivable agony. I tried to cry out, but I could not. Nor could I move. Then everything suddenly seemed to fail, all in a moment, and I was at peace. But it was like the peace of death, I think. And I was aware—I don't know how—that Mr. Harding was dead. I moved. I looked at my watch. It was a minute after half-past three. I noted down the time. And this morning—I heard."

"And then?"

"Only then I understood my loss—the loss to us all. Ah, Mr. Malling, you knew him, but not as I did! Few or none knew him as I did. He was the greatest and best of men, full of power, but full of kindness and goodness, too. He guided me in everything. I can never tell you how I looked up to him, how I trusted him. His judgment was extraordinary, his reading of character was unerring. I do believe he knew me better than I knew myself. What shall I do without him?"

The curate's grief was almost as genuine and unself-conscious as a child's, and Malling felt as if at that moment, like a child, he felt himself adrift in a difficult world. His gentle, kindly, but not strong face was distorted, but not hardened, by his distress, which seemed begging for sympathy. And Malling remembered the Henry Chichester he had known some years ago, before the days of St. Joseph's, the saintly but rather weak man, beloved by every one, but ruling no one. That man was surely before him, and that man knew not how to play a hypocrite's part. Yet Malling felt he must test him.

"His death is very sad," he replied; "but surely his powers had been on the decline for a long while."

“His powers, but not his capacity for goodness. His patience was angelic. Even when the cruelest blow of all fell upon him, even when his wife—whom, God forgive me! I don’t think some of us can ever forgive—even when she deserted him in his hour of need, he never complained. He knew it was God’s hand upon him, and he submitted. He has taught me what true patience is. What I owe to him! What I owe to him!”

As if distressed beyond measure, the curate got up, almost wringing his thin hands.

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"It was he who sacrificed his time for me!" he continued, moving restlessly about the room. "But I seem to remember I told you. Didn't I tell you—or was it some one else?—how he gave up the hours which should have been hours of repose in order that my will might be strengthened, that I might be developed into a man more worthy to be his coadjutor? When I think, when I remember—"

His light, tenor voice failed. Tears stood in his gentle, blue eyes.

"If I am worth anything at all," he suddenly cried out, "if I have gained any force of character, any power for good at all, I owe it all to my rector's self-sacrificing endeavors on my behalf—of course, through God's blessing."

"Then," said Malling, "you think that Mr. Harding changed you by his influence?"

"He helped me to develop, he brought me on. Jealousy was unknown to him. I was a very poor preacher. He taught me how to hold people's attention. When I knew he was near me I sometimes seemed almost inspired. I was inspired by him. I preached almost as if out of his mouth. And now!"

He made a despairing gesture.

"Now it will all be different!" he exclaimed.

And almost involuntarily Malling found himself echoing:

"Yes, now it will all be different."

He had seen, he had heard, enough to make his report to the professor, and he resolved to go. He held out his hand.

"Oh, but," said Chichester, pressing one hand to his forehead, "I'm so selfish, so forgetful in my great grief! Surely you said you had come on some matter of importance."

"It will wait," said Malling. "Another day. Go and rest now. You need rest. Any one can see that."

"Thank you, thank you," said Chichester, with quivering lips. "You are very thoughtful, very good."

Malling took his hand in farewell. As he did so there was a sharp knock at the front door. Chichester started violently.

"Oh, I do hope it is no one for me!" he cried out. "I cannot—"

He opened the door of the sitting-room a little way and listened. Voices were audible below, Ellen's voice and another woman's.

"You, ma'am! Oh, of course he will see you!"

"Of course."

"I didn't know who it was, ma'am."

"Is it this way?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll show you. We do feel it, ma'am. The poor gentleman used to come here so often of nights."

"Did he? I didn't know that."

Malling recognized the second voice as Lady Sophia's. A moment, and she was ushered into the room. She was dressed in black, but not in widow's weeds, and wore a veil which she pushed hastily up as she came in almost with a rush. When she saw Malling, for a moment she looked disconcerted.

"Oh, I thought—" she began. She stood still. Chichester said nothing, and did not move. Malling went toward her.

"I was very much grieved," he said, "at the news I heard to-day."

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She gave him her hand. He knew his words were conventional. How could they be anything else? But Lady Sophia's manner in giving him her hand was not conventional. She stretched it out without even looking at him. She said nothing. Her eyes were fixed upon Chichester, who stood on the other side of the little room in a rigid attitude, with his eyes cast down, as if he could not bear to see the woman who had just entered.

"I offer you my sympathy," Malling added.

"Sympathy!" said Lady Sophia, with a sharp note in her voice suggestive of intense, almost febrile excitement. "Then didn't you know?"

She stared at him, turning her head swiftly.

"Know?"

"That I had left him? Yes, I left him, and now he is dead. Do you expect me to be sorry? Well, I am not sorry. Ah, I see you don't understand!"

She made a movement toward Chichester. It was obvious that she was so intensely excited that she had lost the power of self-control.

"Nobody understands me but you!" she cried out to Chichester. "You knew what he was, you knew what I endured, you know what I must feel now. Oh, it's no use pretending. I'm sick of pretence. You have taught me to care for absolute truth and only that. My relations, my friends—ah! to-day I have been almost suffocated with hypocrisy! And now, when I come here—" she flung out her hand toward Malling—"to get away from it all—'grieved,' 'my sympathy!' I can't bear any more of that. Tell him! You tell him! You're so strong, so terribly sincere! One can rest upon your strength when all else fails one!"

She tottered. For an instant it seemed to Malling that she was going to fall against Chichester's shoulder; but she caught at a chair, and saved herself.

"Mr. Chichester!" she said, "tell him! Tell him for me!"

"I have nothing to tell him," said Chichester, with a sort of mild, almost weak coldness, and wearily.

"Nothing!" She went nearer to him. "But—you don't welcome me!"

Chichester looked up, but immediately cast down his eyes again.

"I cannot," he said. "At this moment I simply cannot."

An expression of terrified surprise transformed Lady Sophia's face. She went close up to Chichester, staring at him.

"Why not?" she asked.

"You must know that."

She stood still, always staring at him, as if searching for something which she did not find.

"Why not?" she repeated.

"You left—him when he needed you most. You left him to die alone."

Lady Sophia suddenly turned round to Malling and scrutinized his face, as if demanding from him sympathy in her horrified amazement. He regarded her calmly, and she turned again to the curate.

"What do you mean?" she said, and her voice had changed.

"That his friends can never be yours", said Chichester, as if making a great effort, driven to it by some intense feeling.

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"You call yourself his friend!" said Lady Sophia. Her voice vibrated with scorn.

"At any rate, he was mine, my best friend. And now he has gone forever!"

Lady Sophia drew in her breath.

"You hypocrite!" she said. "You hypocrite!"

She spoke like one under the influence of an emotion so intense that it could not be gainsaid.

"To pretend you admired him, loved him—*you!*"

"I did admire and love him."

She seemed to be struck dumb by his quiet manner, by the conviction in his voice. In a moment she turned round again toward Malling. Her face had quite changed. It was working nervously. The mouth quivered. She stood for a moment, then suddenly she made for the door. As she passed Malling, she whispered: "The strength—where is it? Oh, I'm afraid of him! I'm afraid of him!"

She disappeared. Almost immediately Malling heard the street door shut.

"I—I cannot pretend to her," Chichester said, "even in my own house."

He seemed greatly moved, almost on the verge of tears.

"I'll leave you alone," said Malling. "You need to be alone."

"Thank you! Thank you!" said Chichester.

And without another word he went into the bedroom, shutting the folding-doors behind him.

At half-past seven that same evening Malling was with Professor Stepton, and made what the professor called his "report."

"Ah!" said the professor when he had finished.

"Did you expect Chichester to behave like that, to be like that?" asked Malling.

"I hoped he would."

"Hoped! Why?"

“Because it enables me to accept as facts certain things about which I must otherwise have remained in doubt. Of course I must see Chichester for myself. But he’ll be just the same, just the same.”

The professor’s eyes shone, and he poked his chin forward.

“The reverend gentlemen of St. Joseph’s have provided me with a basis,” he exclaimed emphatically.

“A basis! For what?” asked Mailing.

“For future experiments and investigations of a highly interesting nature. Ruskin was very often wrong, but he was right when he said, in a lucid moment, that every creature is precious. Well, good-night, Mailing. I must get to work. I’ll explain everything to you later.”

Almost joyously he shut the door on his friend. Almost joyously he sat down once more before his writing-table and seized his pen and his note-book.

But he did not begin to write. His face suddenly changed. He put his pen down, pushed his note-book away, sat back in his chair, and let his pointed chin drop toward his breast. And presently he began to mutter to himself.

“A little science!” he muttered. “A little science sends man far away from God. A great deal of science brings man back to God. Which is it now—you professor, you? Which is it now?”