

The Past

By Ellen Glasgow

I had no sooner entered the house than I knew something was wrong. Though I had never been in so splendid a place before—it was one of those big houses just off Fifth Avenue—I had a suspicion from the first that the magnificence covered a secret disturbance. I was always quick to receive impressions, and when the black iron doors swung together behind me, I felt as if I were shut inside of a prison.

When I gave my name and explained that I was the new secretary, I was delivered into the charge of an elderly lady's maid, who looked as if she had been crying. Without speaking a word, though she nodded kindly enough, she led me down the hail, and then up a flight of stairs at the back of the house to a pleasant bedroom in the third story. There was a great deal of sunshine, and the walls, which were painted a soft yellow, made the room very cheerful. It would be a comfortable place to sit in when I was not working, I thought, while the sad-faced maid stood watching me remove my wraps and hat.

"If you are not tired, Mrs. Vanderbridge would like to dictate a few letters," she said presently, and they were the first words she had spoken.

"I am not a bit tired. Will you take me to her?" One of the reasons, I knew, which had decided Mrs. Vanderbridge to engage me was the remarkable similarity of our handwriting. We were both Southerners, and though she was now famous on two continents for her beauty, I couldn't forget that she had got her early education at the little academy for young ladies in Fredericksburg. This was a bond of sympathy in my thoughts at least, and, heaven knows, I needed to remember it while I followed the maid down the narrow stairs and along the wide hail to the front of the house.

In looking back after a year, I can recall every detail of that first meeting. Though it was barely four o'clock, the electric lamps were turned on in the hall, and I can still see the mellow light that shone over the staircase and lay in pools on the old pink rugs, which were so soft and fine that I felt as if I were walking on flowers. I remember the sound of music from a room somewhere on the first floor, and the scent of lilies and hyacinths that drifted from the conservatory. I remember it all, every note of music, every whiff of fragrance; but most vividly I remember Mrs. Vanderbridge as she looked round, when the door opened, from the wood fire into which she had been gazing. Her eyes caught me first. They were so wonderful that for a moment I couldn't see anything else; then I took in slowly the dark red of her hair, the clear pallor of her skin, and the long, flowing lines of her figure in a tea-gown of blue silk. There was a white bearskin rug under her feet, and while she stood, there before the wood fire, she looked as if she had absorbed the beauty and colour of the house as a crystal vase absorbs the light. Only when she spoke to me, and I went nearer, did I detect the heaviness beneath her eyes and the nervous quiver of her mouth, which drooped a little at the corners. Tired and worn as she was, I never saw her afterwards—not even when she was dressed for the opera—look quite so lovely, so much like an exquisite flower, as she did on that first afternoon. When I knew her better, I discovered that she was a changeable beauty, there were days when all the colour seemed to go out of her, and she looked dull and haggard, but at her best no one I've ever seen could compare with her.

She asked me a few questions, and though she was pleasant and kind, I knew that she scarcely listened to my responses. While I sat down at the desk and dipped my pen into the ink, she flung herself on the couch before the fire with a movement which struck me as hopeless. I saw her feet tap the white fur rug, while she plucked nervously at the lace on the end of one of the gold-coloured sofa cushions. For an instant the thought flashed through my mind that she had been taking something—a drug of some sort—and that she was suffering now from the effects of it. Then she looked at me steadily, almost as if she were reading my thoughts, and I knew that I was wrong. Her large radiant eyes were as innocent as a child's.

She dictated a few notes—all declining invitations—and then, while I still waited pen in hand, she sat up on the couch with one of her quick movements, and said in a low voice, "I am not dining out to-night, Miss Wrenn. I am not well enough."

"I am sorry for that." It was all I could think of to say, for I did not understand why she should have told me.

"If you don't mind, I should like you to come down to dinner. There will be only Mr. Vanderbridge and myself."

"Of course I will come if you wish it." I couldn't very well refuse to do what she asked me, yet I told myself, while I answered, that if I had known she expected me to make one of the family, I should never, not even at twice the salary, have taken the place. It didn't take me a minute to go over my slender wardrobe in my mind and realize that I had nothing to wear that would look well enough.

"I can see you don't like it," she added after a moment, almost wistfully, "but it won't be often. It is only when we are dining alone."

This, I thought, was even queerer than the request—or command—for I knew from her tone, just as plainly as if she had told me in words, that she did not wish to dine alone with her husband.

"I am ready to help you in any way—in any way that I can," I replied, and I was so deeply moved by her appeal that my voice broke in spite of my effort to control it. After my lonely life I dare say I should have loved any one who really needed me, and from the first moment that I read the appeal in Mrs. Vanderbridge's face I felt that I was willing to work my fingers to the bone for her.

Nothing that she asked of me was too much when she asked it in that voice, with that look.

"I am glad you are nice," she said, and for the first time she smiled—a charming, girlish smile with a hint of archness. "We shall get on beautifully, I know, because J can talk to you. My last secretary was English, and I frightened her almost to death whenever I tried to talk to her." Then her tone grew serious. "You won't mind dining with us. Roger—Mr. Vanderbridge—is the most charming man in the world."

"Is that his picture?"

"Yes, the one in the Florentine frame. The other is my brother. Do you think we are alike?"

"Since you've told me, I notice a likeness." Already I had picked up the Florentine frame from the desk, and was eagerly searching the features of Mr. Vanderbridge. It was an arresting face, dark, thoughtful, strangely appealing, and picturesque—though this may have been due, of course, to the photographer. The more I looked at it, the more there grew upon me an uncanny feeling of familiarity; but not until the next day, while I was still trying to account for the impression that I had seen the picture before, did there flash into my mind the memory of an old portrait of a Florentine nobleman in a loan collection last winter. I can't remember the name of the painter—I am not sure that it was known—but this photograph might have been taken from

the painting. There was the same imaginative sadness in both faces, the same haunting beauty of feature, and one surmised that there must be the same rich darkness of colouring. The only striking difference was that the man in the photograph looked much older than the original of the portrait, and I remembered that the lady who had engaged me was the second wife of Mr. Vanderbridge and some ten or fifteen years younger, I had heard, than her husband.

“Have you ever seen a more wonderful face?” asked Mrs. Vanderbridge. “Doesn’t he look as if he might have been painted by Titian?”

“Is he really so handsome as that?”

“He is a little older and sadder, that is all. When we were married it was exactly like him.” For an instant she hesitated and then broke out almost bitterly, “Isn’t that a face any woman might fall in love with, a face any woman—living or dead—would not be willing to give up?”

Poor child, I could see that she was overwrought and needed some one to talk to, but it seemed queer to me that she should speak so frankly to a stranger. I wondered why any one so rich and so beautiful should ever be unhappy—for I had been schooled by poverty to believe that money is the first essential of happiness—and yet her unhappiness was as evident as her beauty, or the luxury that enveloped her. At that instant I felt that I hated Mr. Vanderbridge, for whatever the secret tragedy of their marriage might be, I instinctively knew that the fault was not on the side of the wife. She was as sweet and winning as if she were still the reigning beauty in the academy for young ladies. I knew with a knowledge deeper than any conviction that she was not to blame, and if she wasn’t to blame, then who under heaven could be at fault except her husband?

In a few minutes a friend came in to tea, and I went upstairs to my room, and unpacked the blue taffeta dress I had bought for my sister’s wedding. I was still doubtfully regarding it when there was a knock at my door, and the maid with the sad face came in to bring me a pot of tea. After she had placed the tray on the table, she stood nervously twisting a napkin in her hands while she waited for me to leave my unpacking and sit down in the easy chair she had drawn up under the lamp.

“How do you think Mrs. Vanderbridge is looking?” she asked abruptly in a voice, that held a breathless note of suspense. Her nervousness and the queer look in her face made me stare at her sharply. This was a house, I was beginning to feel, where everybody, from the mistress down, wanted to question me. Even the silent maid had found voice for interrogation.

I think her the loveliest person I’ve ever seen,” I answered after a moment’s hesitation. There couldn’t be any harm in telling her how much I admired her mistress.

Yes, she is lovely—every one thinks so—and her nature is as sweet as her face.” She was becoming loquacious. “I have never had a lady who was so sweet and kind. She hasn’t always been rich, and that may be the reason she never seems to grow hard and selfish, the reason she spends so much of her life thinking of other people. It’s been six years now, ever since her marriage, that I’ve lived with her, and in all that time I’ve never had a cross word from her”

“One can see that. With everything she has she ought to be as happy as the day is long.”

“She ought to be.” Her voice dropped, and I saw her glance suspiciously at the door, which she had closed when she entered. “She ought to be, but she isn’t. I have never seen any one so unhappy as she has been of late—ever since last summer. I suppose I oughtn’t to talk about it, but I’ve kept it to myself so long that I feel as if it was killing me. If she was my own sister, I couldn’t be any fonder of her, and yet I have to see her suffer day after day, and not say a word—not even to her. She isn’t the sort of lady you could speak to about a thing like that.”

She broke down, and dropping on the rug at my feet, hid her face in her hands. It was plain that she was suffering acutely, and while I patted her shoulder, I thought what a wonderful mistress Mrs. Vanderbridge must be to have attached a servant to her so strongly.

“You must remember that I am a stranger in the house, that I scarcely know her, that I’ve never even seen her husband,” I said warningly, for I’ve always avoided, as far as possible, the confidences of servants.

“But you look as if you could be trusted.” The maid’s nerves, as well as the mistress’s, were on edge, I could see. “And she needs somebody who can help her. She needs a real friend—somebody who will stand by her no matter what happens.”

Again, as in the room downstairs, there flashed through my mind the suspicion that I had got into a place where people took drugs or drink—or were all out of their minds. I had heard of such houses.

“How can I help her? She won’t confide in me, and even if she did, what could I do for her?”

“You can stand by and watch. You can come between her and harm—if you see it.” She had risen from the floor and stood wiping her reddened eyes on the napkin. “I don’t know what it is, but I know it is there. I feel it even when I can’t see it.”

Yes, they were all out of their minds; there couldn’t be any other explanation. The whole episode was incredible. It was the kind of thing, I kept telling myself, that did not happen. Even in a book nobody could believe it.

“But her husband? He is the one who must protect her.”

She gave me a blighting look. “He would if he could. He isn’t to blame—you mustn’t think that. He is one of the best men in the world, but he can’t help her. He can’t help her because he doesn’t know. He doesn’t see it.”

A bell rang somewhere, and catching up the tea-tray, she paused just long enough to throw me a pleading word, “Stand between her and harm, if you see it.”

When she had gone I locked the door after her, and turned on all the lights in the room. Was there really a tragic mystery in the house, or were they all mad, as I had first imagined? The feeling of apprehension, of vague uneasiness, which had come to me when I entered the iron doors, swept over me in a wave while I sat there in the soft glow of the shaded electric light. Something was wrong. Somebody was making that lovely woman unhappy, and who, in the name of reason, could this somebody be except her husband? Yet the maid had spoken of him as “one of the best men in the world,” and it was impossible to doubt the tearful sincerity of her voice. Well, the riddle was too much for me. I gave it up at last with a sigh—dreading the hour that would call the downstairs to meet Mr. Vanderbridge. I felt in every nerve and fibre of my body that I should hate him the moment I looked at him.

‘But at eight o’clock, when I went reluctantly downstairs, I had a surprise. Nothing could have been kinder than the way Mr. Vanderbridge greeted me, and I could tell as soon as I met his eyes that there wasn’t anything vicious or violent in his nature. He reminded me more than ever of the portrait in the loan collection, and I thought he was so much older than the Florentine nobleman, he had the same thoughtful look. Of course I am not an artist, but I have always tried, in my way, to be a reader of personality; and it didn’t take a particularly keen observer to discern the character and intellect in Mr. Vanderbridge’s face. Even now I remember it as the noblest face I have ever seen; and unless I had possessed at least a shade of penetration, I doubt if I should have detected the melancholy. For it was only when he was thinking deeply that this sadness seemed to spread like a veil over his features. At other times he was cheerful and even gay in his manner; and his rich dark eyes would light up now and then with irrepressible humour. From the

way he looked at his wife I could tell that there was no lack of love or tenderness on his side any more than there was on hers. It was obvious that he was still as much in love with her as he had been before his marriage, and my immediate perception of this only deepened the mystery that enveloped them. If the fault wasn't his and wasn't hers, then who was responsible for the shadow that hung over the house?

For the shadow was there. I could feel it, vague and dark, while we talked about the war and the remote possibilities of peace in the spring. Mrs. Vanderbridge looked young and lovely in her gown of white satin with pearls on her bosom, but her violet eyes were almost black in the candlelight, and I had a curious feeling that this blackness was the colour of thought. Something troubled her to despair, yet I was as positive as I could be of anything I had ever been told that she had breathed no word of this anxiety or distress to her husband. Devoted as they were, a nameless dread, fear, or apprehension divided them. It was the thing I had felt from the moment I entered the house; the thing I had heard in the tearful voice of the maid. One could scarcely call it horror, because it was too vague, too impalpable, for so vivid a name; yet, after all these quiet months, horror is the only word I can think of that in any way expresses the emotion which pervaded the house.

I had never seen so beautiful a dinner table and I was gazing with pleasure at the damask and glass and silver—there was a silver basket of chrysanthemums, I remember, in the centre of the table—when I noticed a nervous movement of Mrs. Vanderbridge's head, and saw her glance hastily toward the door and the staircase beyond. We had been talking animatedly, and as Mrs. Vanderbridge turned away, I had just made a remark to her husband, who appeared to have fallen into a sudden fit of abstraction, and was gazing thoughtfully over his soup-plate at the white and yellow chrysanthemums. It occurred to me, while I watched him, that he was probably absorbed in some financial problem, and I regretted that I had been so careless as to speak to him. To my surprise, however, he replied immediately in a natural tone, and I saw, or imagined that I saw, Mrs. Vanderbridge throw me a glance of gratitude and relief. I can't remember what we were talking about, but I recall perfectly that the conversation kept up pleasantly, without a break, until dinner was almost half over. The roast had been served, and I was in the act of helping myself to potatoes, when I became aware that Mr. Vanderbridge had again fallen into his reverie. This time he scarcely seemed to hear his wife's voice when she spoke to him, and I watched the sadness cloud his face while he continued to stare straight ahead of him with a look that was almost yearning in its intensity.

Again I saw Mrs. Vanderbridge, with her nervous gesture, glance in the direction of the hail, and to my amazement, as she did so, a woman's figure glided noiselessly over the old Persian rug at the door, and entered the dining-room. I was wondering why no one spoke to her, why she spoke to no one, when I saw her sink into a chair on the other side of Mr. Vanderbridge and unfold her napkin. She was quite young, younger even than Mrs. Vanderbridge, and though she was not really beautiful, she was the most graceful creature I had ever imagined. Her dress was of gray stuff, softer and more clinging than silk, and of a peculiar misty texture and colour, and her parted hair lay like twilight on either side of her forehead. She was not like any one I had ever seen before—she appeared so much frailer, so much more elusive, as if she would vanish if you touched her. I can't describe, even months afterwards, the singular way in which she attracted and repelled me.

At first I glanced inquiringly at Mrs. Vanderbridge, hoping that she would introduce me, but she went on talking rapidly in an intense, quivering voice, without noticing the presence of her guest by so much as the lifting of her eyelashes. Mr. Vanderbridge still sat there, silent and

detached, and all the time the eyes of the stranger—starry eyes with a mist over them—looked straight through me at the tapestry on the wall. I knew she didn't see me and that it wouldn't have waded the slightest difference to her if she had seen me. In spite of her grace and her girlishness I did not like her, and I felt that this aversion was not on my side alone. I do not know how I received the impression that she hated Mrs. Vanderbridge—never once had she glanced in her direction—yet I was aware from the moment of her entrance, that she was bristling with animosity, though animosity is too strong a word for the resentful spite, like the jealous rage of a spoiled child, which gleamed now and then in her eyes. I couldn't think of her as wicked any more than I could think of a bad child as wicked. She was merely wilful and undisciplined and—I hardly know how to convey what I mean—elfish.

After her entrance the dinner dragged on heavily. Mrs. Vanderbridge still kept up her nervous chatter, but nobody listened, for I was too embarrassed to pay any attention to what she said, and Mr. Vanderbridge had never recovered from his abstraction. He was like a man in a dream, not observing a thing that happened before him, while the strange woman sat there in the candlelight with her curious look of vagueness and unreality. To my astonishment not even the servants appeared to notice her, and though she had unfolded her napkin when she sat down, she wasn't served with either the roast or the salad. Once or twice, particularly when a course was served, I glanced at Mrs. Vanderbridge to see if she would rectify the mistake, but she kept her gaze fixed on her plate. It was just as if there were a conspiracy to ignore the presence of the stranger, though she had been, from the moment of her entrance, the dominant figure at the table. You tried to pretend she wasn't there, and yet you knew—you knew vividly that she was gazing insolently straight through you.

The dinner lasted, it seemed, for hours, and you may imagine my relief when at last Mrs. Vanderbridge rose and led the way back into the drawing-room. At first I thought the stranger would follow us, but when I glanced round from the hall she was still sitting there beside Mr. Vanderbridge, who was smoking a cigar with his coffee.

"Usually he takes his coffee with me," said Mrs. Vanderbridge, "but tonight he has things to think over."

"I thought he seemed absent-minded."

"You noticed it, then?" She turned to me with her straightforward glance. "I always wonder how much strangers notice. He hasn't been well of late, and he has these spells of depression. Nerves are dreadful things, aren't they?"

I laughed. "So I've heard, but I've never been able to afford them."

"Well, they do cost a great deal, don't they?" She had a trick of ending her sentences with a question. "I hope your room is comfortable, and that you don't feel timid about being alone on that floor. If you haven't nerves, you can't get nervous, can you?"

"No, I can't get nervous." Yet while I spoke, I was conscious of a shiver deep down in me, as if my senses reacted again to the dread that permeated the atmosphere.

As soon as I could, I escaped to my room, and I was sitting there over a book, when the maid—her name was Hopkins, I had discovered—came in on the pretext of inquiring if I had everything I needed. One of the innumerable servants had already turned down my bed, so when Hopkins appeared at the door, I suspected at once that there was a hidden motive underlying her ostensible purpose.

"Mrs. Vanderbridge told me to look after you," she began. "She is afraid you will be lonely until you learn the way of things."

"No, I'm not lonely," I answered. "I've never had time to be lonely."

"I used to be like that; but time hangs heavy on my bands now. That's why I've taken to knitting." She held out a gray yarn muffler. "I had an operation a year ago, and since then Mrs. Vanderbridge has had another maid—a French one—to sit up for her at night and undress her. She is always so fearful of overtaxing us, though there isn't really enough work for two lady's-maids, because she is so thoughtful that she never gives any trouble if she can help it."

"It must be nice to be rich," I said idly, as I turned a page of my book. Then I added almost before I realized what I was saying, "The other lady doesn't look as if she had so much money."

Her face turned paler if that were possible, and for a minute I thought she was going to faint. "The other lady?"

"I mean the one who came down late to dinner—the one in the gray dress. She wore no jewels, and her dress wasn't low in the neck."

"Then you saw her?" There was a curious flicker in her face as if her pallor came and went.

"We were at the table when she came in. Has Mr. Vanderbridge a secretary who lives in the house?"

"No, he hasn't a secretary except at his office. When he wants one at the house, he telephones to his office."

"I wondered why she came, for she didn't eat any dinner, and nobody spoke to her—not even Mr. Vanderbridge."

"Oh, he never speaks to her. Thank God, it hasn't come to that yet."

"Then why does she come? It must be dreadful to be treated like that, and before the servants, too. Does she come often?"

"There are months and months when she doesn't. I can always tell by the way Mrs. Vanderbridge picks up. You wouldn't know her, she is so full of life—the very picture of happiness. Then one evening she—the Other One, I mean—comes back again, just as she did tonight, just as she did last summer, and it all begins over from the beginning."

"But can't they keep her out—the Other One? Why do they let her in?"

"Mrs. Vanderbridge tries hard. She tries all she can every minute. You saw her tonight?"

"And Mr. Vanderbridge? Can't he help her?"

She shook her head with an ominous gesture. "He doesn't know."

"He doesn't know she is there? Why, she was close by him. She never took her eyes off him except when she was staring through me at the wall."

"Oh, he knows she is there, but not in that way. He doesn't know that any one else knows."

I gave it up, and after a minute she said in a suppressed voice, "It seems strange that you should have seen her. I never have."

"But you know all about her."

"I know and I don't know. Mrs. Vanderbridge lets things drop sometimes—she gets ill and feverish very easily—but she never tells me anything outright. She isn't that sort."

"Haven't the servants told you about her—the Other One?"

At this, I thought, she seemed startled. "Oh, they don't know anything to tell. They feel that something is wrong; that is why they never stay longer than a week or two—we've had eight butlers since autumn—but they never see what it is."

She stooped to pick up the ball of yarn which had rolled under my chair. "If the time ever comes when you can stand between them, you will do it?" she asked.

"Between Mrs. Vanderbridge and the Other One?"

Her look answered me.

"You think, then, that she means harm to her?"

“I don’t know. Nobody knows—but she is killing her.”

The clock struck ten, and I returned to my book with a yawn, while Hopkins gathered up her work and went out, after wishing me a formal good night. The odd part about our secret conferences was that as soon as they were over, we began to pretend so elaborately to each other that they had never been.

“I’ll tell Mrs. Vanderbridge that you are very comfortable,” was the last remark Hopkins made before she sidled out of the door and left me alone with the mystery. It was one of those situations—I am obliged to repeat this over and over—that was too preposterous for me to believe even while I was surrounded and overwhelmed by its reality. I didn’t dare face what I thought, I didn’t dare face even what I felt; but I went to bed shivering in a warm room, while I resolved passionately that if the chance ever came to me I would stand between Mrs. Vanderbridge and this unknown evil that threatened her.

In the morning Mrs. Vanderbridge went out shopping, and I did not see her until the evening, when she passed me on the staircase as she was going out to dinner and the opera. She was radiant in blue velvet, with diamonds in her hair and at her throat, and I wondered again how any one so lovely could ever be troubled.

“I hope you had a pleasant day, Miss Wrenn,” she said kindly. “I have been too busy to get off any letters, but tomorrow we shall begin early.” Then, as if from an afterthought, she looked back and added, “There are some new novels in my sitting-room. You might care to look over them.”

When she had gone, I went upstairs to the sitting-room and turned over the books, but I couldn’t, to save my life, force an interest in printed romances after meeting Mrs. Vanderbridge and remembering the mystery that surrounded her. I wondered if “the Other One,” as Hopkins called her, lived in the house, and I was still wondering this when the maid came in and began putting the table to rights.

“Do they dine out often?” I asked.

“They used to, but since Mr. Vanderbridge hasn’t been so well, Mrs. Vanderbridge doesn’t like to go without him. She only went tonight because he begged her to.”

She had barely finished speaking when the door opened and Mr. Vanderbridge came in and sat down in one of the big velvet chairs before the wood fire. He had not noticed us, for one of his moods was upon him, and I was about to slip out as noiselessly as I could when I saw that the Other One was standing in the patch of firelight on the hearth rug. I had not seen her come in, and Hopkins evidently was still unaware of her presence, for while I was watching, I saw the maid turn towards her with a fresh log for the fire. At the moment it occurred to me that Hopkins must be either blind or drunk, for without hesitating in her advance, she moved on the stranger, holding the huge hickory log out in front of her. Then, before I could utter a sound or stretch out a hand to stop her, I saw her walk straight through the gray figure and carefully place the log on the andirons.

So she isn’t real, after all, she is merely a phantom, I found myself thinking, as I fled from the room, and hurried along the hall to the staircase. She is only a ghost, and nobody believes in ghosts any longer. She is something that I know doesn’t exist, yet even, though she can’t possibly be, I can swear that I have seen her. My nerves were so shaken by the discovery that as soon as I reached my room I sank in a heap on the rug, and it was here that Hopkins found me a little later when she came to bring me an extra blanket.

“You looked so upset I thought you might have seen something,” she said. “Did anything happen while you were in the room?”

“She was there all the time—every blessed minute. You walked right through her when you put the log on the fire. Is it possible that you didn’t see her?”

“No, I didn’t see anything out of the way.” She was plainly frightened. “Where was she standing?”

“On the hearthrug in front of Mr. Vanderbridge. To reach the fire you had to walk straight through her, for she didn’t move. She didn’t give way an inch.”

“Oh, she never gives way. She never gives way living or dead.”

This was more than human nature could stand. “In Heaven’s name,” I cried irritably, “who is she?”

“Don’t you know?” She appeared genuinely surprised. “Why, she is the other Mrs. Vanderbridge. She died fifteen years ago, just a year after they were married, and people say a scandal was hushed up about her, which he never knew. She isn’t a good sort, that’s what I think of her, though they say he almost worshipped her.”

“And she still has this hold on him?”

“He can’t shake it off, that’s what’s the matter with him, and if it goes on, he will end his days in an asylum. You see, she was very young, scarcely more than a girl, he got the idea in his head that it was marrying him that killed her. If you want to know what I think, I believe she puts it there for a purpose.”

“You mean—?” I was so completely at sea that I couldn’t frame a rational question.

“I mean she haunts him purposely in order to drive him out of his mind. She was always that sort, jealous and exacting, the kind that clutches and strangles a man, and I’ve often thought, though I’ve no head for speculation, that we carry into the next world the traits and feelings that have got the better of us in this one. It seems to me only common sense to believe that we’re obliged to work them off somewhere until we are free of them. That is the way my first lady used to talk anyhow, and I’ve never found anybody that could give me a more sensible idea.”

“And isn’t there any way to stop it? What has Mrs. Vanderbridge done?”

“Oh, she can’t do anything now. It has got beyond her, though she has had doctor after doctor, and tried everything she could think of. But, you see, she is handicapped because she can’t mention it to her husband. He doesn’t know that she knows.”

“And she won’t tell him?”

“She is the sort that would die first—just the opposite from the Other One—for she leaves him free, she never clutches and strangles. It isn’t her way.” For a moment she hesitated, and then added grimly—“I’ve wondered if you could do anything?”

“If I could? Why, I am a perfect stranger to them all.”

“That’s why I’ve been thinking it. Now, if you could corner her someday—the Other One—and tell her up and down to her face what you think of her.”

The idea was so ludicrous that it made me laugh in spite of my shaken nerves. “They would fancy me out of my wits! Imagine stopping an apparition and telling it what you think of it!”

“Then you might try talking it over with Mrs. Vanderbridge. It would help her to know that you see her also.”

But the next morning, when I went down to Mrs. Vanderbridge’s room, I found that she was too ill to see me. At noon a trained nurse came on the case, and for a week we took our meals together in the morning-room upstairs. She appeared competent enough, but I am sure that she didn’t so much as suspect that there was anything wrong in the house except the influenza which had attacked Mrs. Vanderbridge the night of the opera. Never once during that week did I catch a glimpse of the Other One, though I felt her presence whenever I left my room and passed

through the hail below. I knew all the time as well as if I had seen her that she was hidden there, watching, watching—

At the end of the week Mrs. Vanderbridge sent for me to write some letters, and when I went into her room I found her lying on the couch with a tea table in front of her. She asked me to make the tea because she was still so weak, and I saw that she looked flushed and feverish, and that her eyes were unnaturally large and bright. I hoped she wouldn't talk to me, because people in that state are apt to talk too much and then to blame the listener; but I had hardly taken my seat at the tea table before she said in a hoarse voice—the cold had settled on her chest:

“Miss Wrenn, I have wanted to ask you ever since the other evening—did you—did you see anything unusual at dinner? From your face when you came out I thought—I thought—”

I met this squarely. “That I might have? Yes, I did see something.”

“You saw her?”

“I saw a woman come in and sit down at the table, and I wondered why no one served her. I saw her quite distinctly.”

“A small woman, thin and pale, in a grey dress?”

“She was so vague and—and misty, you know what I mean, that it is hard to describe her; but I should know her again anywhere. She wore her hair parted and drawn down over her ears. It was very dark and fine—as fine as spun silk.”

We were speaking in low voices, and unconsciously we had moved closer together while my idle hands left the tea things.

“Then you know,” she said earnestly, “that she really comes—that I am not out of my mind—that it is not an hallucination?”

“I know that I saw her. I would swear to it. But doesn't Mr. Vanderbridge see her also?”

“Not as we see her. He thinks that she is in his mind only.” Then after an uncomfortable silence, she added suddenly, “She is really a thought, you know. She is his thought of her—but he doesn't know that she is visible to the rest of us.”

“And he brings her back by thinking of her?”

She leaned nearer while a quiver passed over her features and the flush deepened in her cheeks. “That is the only way she comes back—the only way she has the power to come back—as a thought. There are months and months when she leaves us in peace because he is thinking of other things, but of late, since his illness, she has been with him almost constantly.” A sob broke from her, and she buried her face in her hands. “I suppose she is always trying to come—only she is too vague—and she hasn't any form that we can see except when he thinks of her as she used to look when she was alive. His thought of her is like that, hurt and tragic and revengeful. You see, he feels that he ruined her life because she died when the child was coming—a month before it would have been born.”

“And if he were to see her differently, would she change? Would she cease to be revengeful if he stopped thinking her so?”

“God only knows. I've wondered and wondered how I might move her to pity.”

“Then you feel that she is really there? That she exists outside of his mind?”

“How can I tell? What do any of us know of the world beyond? She exists as much as I exist to you or you to me. Isn't thought all that there is—all that we know?”

This was deeper than I could follow; but in order not to appear stupid, I murmured sympathetically.

“And does she make him unhappy when she comes?”

“She is killing him—and me. I believe that is why she does it.”

“Are you sure that she could stay away? When he thinks of her isn’t she obliged to come back?”

“Oh, I’ve asked that question over and over! In spite of his calling her so unconsciously, I believe she comes of her own will. I have always the feeling—it has never left me for an instant—that she could appear differently if she would. I have studied her for years until I know her like a book, and though she is only an apparition, I am perfectly positive that she wills evil to us both. Don’t you think he would change that if he could? Don’t you think he would make her kind instead of vindictive if he had the power?”

“But if he could remember her as loving and tender?”

“I don’t know. I give it up—but it is killing me.”

It *was* killing her. As the days passed I began to realize that she had spoken the truth. I watched her bloom fade slowly and her lovely features grow pinched and thin like the features of a starved person. The harder she fought the apparition, the more I saw that the battle was a losing one, and that she was only wasting her strength. So impalpable yet so pervasive was the enemy that it was like fighting a poisonous odour. There was nothing to wrestle with, and yet there was everything. The struggle was wearing her out—was, as she had said, actually “killing her”; but the physician who dosed her daily with drugs—there was need now of a physician—had not the faintest idea of the malady he was treating. In those dreadful days I think that even Mr. Vanderbridge hadn’t a suspicion of the truth. The past was with him so constantly—he was so steeped in the memories of it that the present was scarcely more than a dream to him. It was, you see, a reversal of the natural order of things; the thought had become more vivid to his perceptions than any object. The phantom had been victorious so far, and he was like a man recovering from the effects of a narcotic. He was only half awake, only half alive to the events through which he lived and the people who surrounded him. Oh, I realize that I am telling my story badly!—that I am slurring over the significant interludes! My mind has dealt so long with external details that I have almost forgotten the words that express invisible things. Though the phantom in the house was more real to me than the bread I ate or the floor on which I trod, I can give you no impression of the atmosphere in which we lived day after day—of the suspense, of the dread of something we could not define, of the brooding horror that seemed to lurk in the shadows of the firelight, of the feeling always, day and night, that some unseen person was watching us. How Mrs. Vanderbridge stood it without losing her mind, I have never known; and even now I am not sure that she could have kept her reason if the end had not come when it did. That I accidentally brought it about is one of the things in my life I am most thankful to remember.

It was an afternoon in late winter, and I had just come up from luncheon, when Mrs. Vanderbridge asked me to empty an old desk in one of the upstairs rooms. “I am sending all the furniture in that room away,” she said, “it was bought in a bad period, and I want to clear it out and make room for the lovely things we picked up in Italy. There is nothing in the desk worth saving except some old letters from Mr. Vanderbridge’s mother before her marriage.”

I was glad that she could think of anything so practical as furniture, and it was with relief that I followed her into the dim, rather musty room over the library, where the windows were all tightly closed. Years ago, Hopkins had once told me, the first Mrs. Vanderbridge had used this room for a while, and after her death her husband had been in the habit of shutting himself up alone here in the evenings. This, I inferred, was the secret reason why my employer was sending the furniture away. She had resolved to clear the house of every association with the past.

For a few minutes we sorted the letters in the drawers of the desk, and then, as I expected, Mrs. Vanderbridge became suddenly bored by the task she had undertaken.

She was subject to these nervous reactions, and I was prepared for them even when they seized her so spasmodically. I remember that she was in the very act of glancing over an old letter when she rose impatiently, tossed it into the fire unread, and picked up a magazine she had thrown down on a chair.

“Go over them by yourself, Miss Wrenn,” she said, and it was characteristic of her nature that she should assume my trustworthiness. “If anything seems worth saving you can file it—but I’d rather die than have to wade through all this.”

They were mostly personal letters, and while I went on, carefully filing them, I thought how absurd it was of people to preserve so many papers that were entirely without value. Mr. Vanderbridge I had imagined to be a methodical man, and yet the disorder of the desk produced a painful effect on my systematic temperament. The drawers were filled with letters evidently unsorted, for now and then I came upon a mass of business receipts and acknowledgements crammed in among wedding invitations or letters from some elderly lady, who wrote interminable pale epistles in the finest and most feminine of Italian hands. That a man of Mr. Vanderbridge’s wealth and position should have been so careless about his correspondence amazed me until I recalled the dark hints Hopkins had dropped in some of her midnight conversations. Was it possible that he had actually lost his reason for months after the death of his first wife, during that year when he had shut himself alone with her memory? The question was still in my mind when my eyes fell on the envelope in my hand, and I saw that it was addressed to Mrs. Roger Vanderbridge. So this explained, in a measure at least, the carelessness and the disorder! The desk was not his, but hers, and after her death he had used it only during those desperate months when he barely opened a letter. What he had done in those long evenings when he sat alone here it was beyond me to imagine. Was it any wonder that the brooding should have permanently unbalanced his mind?

At the end of an hour I had sorted and filed the papers, with the intention of asking Mrs. Vanderbridge if she wished me to destroy the ones that seemed unimportant. The letters she had instructed me to keep had not come to my hand, and I was about to give up the search for them, when, in shaking the lock of one of the drawers, the door of a secret compartment fell open and I discovered a dark object, which crumbled and dropped apart when I touched it. Bending nearer I saw that the crumbled mass had once been a bunch of flowers, and that a streamer of purple ribbon still held together the frail structure of wire and stems. In this drawer some one had hidden a sacred treasure, and moved by a sense of romance and adventure, I gathered the dust tenderly in tissue paper, and prepared to take it downstairs to Mrs. Vanderbridge. It was not until then that some letters tied loosely together with a silver cord caught my eyes, and while I picked them up, I remember thinking that they must be the ones for which I had been looking so long. Then, as the cord broke in my grasp and I gathered the letters from the lid of the desk, a word or two flashed back at me through the torn edges of the envelopes, and I realized that they were love letters written, I surmised, some fifteen years ago, by Mr. Vanderbridge to his first wife.

“It may hurt her to see them,” I thought, “but I don’t dare destroy them. There is nothing I can do except give them to her.”

As I left the room, carrying the letters and the ashes of the flowers, the idea of taking them to the husband instead of to the wife, flashed through my mind. Then—I think it was some jealous feeling about the phantom that decided me—I quickened my steps to a run down the staircase.

“They would bring her back. He would think of her more than ever,” I told myself, “so he shall never see them. He shall never see them if I can prevent it.” I believe it occurred to me that Mrs. Vanderbridge would be generous enough to give them to him—she was capable of rising above her jealousy, I knew—but I determined that she shouldn’t do it until I had reasoned it out with her. “If anything on earth would bring back the Other One for good, it would be his seeing these old letters,” I repeated as I hastened down the hall. Mrs. Vanderbridge was lying on the couch before the fire, and I noticed at once that she had been crying. The drawn look in her sweet face went to my heart, and I felt that I would do anything in the world to comfort her. Though she had a book in her hand, I could see that she had not been reading. The electric lamp on the table by her side was already lighted, leaving the rest of the room in shadow, for it was a grey day with a biting edge of snow in the air. It was all very charming in the soft light; but as soon as I entered I had a feeling of oppression that made me want to run out into the wind. If you have ever lived in a haunted house—a house pervaded by an unforgettable past—you will understand the sensation of melancholy that crept over me the minute the shadows began to fall. It was not in myself—of this I am sure, for I have naturally a cheerful temperament—it was in the space that surrounded us and the air we breathed.

I explained to her about the letters, and then, kneeling on the rug in front of her, I emptied the dust of the flowers into the fire. There was, though I hate to confess it, a vindictive pleasure in watching it melt into the flames and at the moment I believe I could have burned the apparition as thankfully. The more I saw of the Other One, the more I found myself accepting Hopkins’ judgment of her. Yes, her behaviour, living and dead, proved that she was not “a good sort.”

My eyes were still on the flames when a sound from Mrs. Vanderbridge—half a sigh, half a sob—made me turn quickly and look up at her.

“But this isn’t his handwriting,” she said in a puzzled tone. “They are love letters, and they are to her—but they are not from him.” For a moment or two she was silent, and I heard the pages rustle in her hands as she turned them impatiently. “They are not from him,” she repeated presently, with an exultant ring in her voice. “They are written after her marriage, but they are from another man.” She was as sternly tragic as an avenging fate. “She wasn’t faithful to him while she lived. She wasn’t faithful to him even while he was hers—”

With a spring I had risen from my knees and was bending over her.

“Then you can save him from her. You can win him back? You have only to show him the letters, and he will believe.”

“Yes, I have only to show him the letters.” She was looking beyond me into the dusky shadows of the fire-light, as if she saw the Other One standing there. “I have only to show him the letters,” I knew now that she was not speaking to me, “and he will believe.”

“Her power over him will be broken,” I cried out. “He will think of her differently. Oh, don’t you see? Can’t you see? It is the only way to make him think of her differently. It is the only way to break for ever the thought that draws her back to him.”

“Yes, I see, it is the only way,” she said slowly; and the words were still on her lips when the door opened and Mr. Vanderbridge entered.

“I came for a cup of tea,” he began, and added with playful tenderness, “What is the only way?”

It was the crucial moment, I realized—it was the hour of destiny for these two—and while he sank wearily into a chair, I looked imploringly at his wife and then at the letters lying scattered loosely about her. If I had had my will I should have flung them at him with a violence which

would have startled him out of his lethargy. Violence, I felt was what he needed—violence, a storm, tears, reproaches—all the things he would never get from his wife.

For a minute or two she sat there, with the letters before her, and watched him with her thoughtful and tender gaze. I knew from her face, so lovely and yet so sad, that she was looking again at invisible things—at the soul of the man she loved, not at the body. She saw him, detached and spiritualized, and she saw also the Other One—for while we waited I became slowly aware of the apparition in the firelight—of the white face and the cloudy hair and the look of animosity and bitterness in the eyes. Never before had I been so profoundly convinced of the malignant will veiled by that thin figure. It was as if the visible form were only a spiral of grey smoke covering a sinister purpose.

“The only way,” said Mrs. Vanderbridge, “is to fight fairly even when one fights evil.” Her voice was like a bell, and as she spoke, she rose from the couch and stood there in her glowing beauty confronting the pale ghost of the past. There was a light about her that was almost unearthly—the light of triumph. The radiance of it blinded me for an instant. It was like a flame, clearing the atmosphere of all that was evil, of all that was poisonous and deadly. She was looking directly at the phantom, and there was no hate in her voice—there was only a great pity, a great sorrow and sweetness.

“I can’t fight you that way,” she said, and I knew that for the first time she had swept aside subterfuge and evasion, and was speaking straight to the presence before her. “After all, you are dead and I am living, and I cannot fight you that way. I give up everything. I give him back to you. Nothing is mine that I cannot win and keep fairly. Nothing is mine that belongs really to you.”

Then, while Mr. Vanderbridge rose, with a start of fear, and came towards her, she bent quickly, and flung the letters into the fire. When he would have stooped to gather the unburned pages, her lovely flowing body curved between his hands and the flames; and so transparent, so ethereal she looked, that I saw—or imagined that I saw—the firelight shine through her. “The only way, my dear, is the right way,” she said softly.

The next instant—I don’t know to this day how or when it began—I was aware that the apparition had drawn nearer, and that the dread and fear, the evil purpose, were no longer a part of her. I saw her clearly for a moment—saw her as I had never seen her before—young and gentle and—yes, this is the only word for it—loving. It was just as if a curse had turned into a blessing, for, while she stood there, I had a curious sensation of being enfolded in a kind of spiritual glow and comfort—only words are useless to describe the feeling because it wasn’t in the least like anything else I had ever known in my life. It was light without heat, glow without light—and yet it was none of these things. The nearest I can come to it is to call it a sense of blessedness—of blessedness that made you at peace with everything you had once hated.

Not until afterwards did I realize that it was the victory of good over evil. Not until afterwards did I discover that Mrs. Vanderbridge had triumphed over the past in the only way that she could triumph. She had won, not by resisting, but by accepting, not by violence, but by gentleness, not by grasping, but by renouncing. Oh, long, long afterwards, I knew that she had robbed the phantom of power over her by robbing it of hatred. She had changed the thought of the past, in that lay her victory.

At the moment I did not understand this. I did not understand it even when I looked again for the apparition in the firelight, and saw that it had vanished. There was nothing there—nothing except the pleasant flicker of light and shadow on the old Persian rug.