

The Power of Darkness

By Edith Nesbit

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

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

'Oh, goodbye; goodbye, all of you,' said Rose. 'I shall miss you. Oh, you don't know how I shall miss you all!'

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

'En voiture, messieurs et dames!'

Folk drew back from the train. There was a whistle.

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

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

'Whither away, sweet nymph?'

'I'm off home,' said Edward. 'The seven-twenty to Calais.'

'Sick of Paris?'

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

'No attraction here now, eh?'

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

'But there are as good fish in the sea—'

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

'The beautiful Rose!' said Vincent.

Edward raised hurriedly the only shield he could find. It happened to be the truth as he saw it. 'Oh,' he said, 'of course, we're all in love with her—and all hopelessly.'

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

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

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

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

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

'You boys,' she said, 'must put up with a shake-down in the new house. I hope the ghost won't worry you. She's an old lady in a figured satin dress. Comes and breathes softly on the back of your neck when you're shaving. Then you see her in the glass, and as often as not you cut your throat.' She laughed. So did Edward and Vincent and the other young men. There were seven or eight of them.

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

'What the deuce?' queried Vincent, in natural amazement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And now, in Paris, Rose speeding away towards Cannes, Vincent said:

'Let's look in at the Musée Grévin.'

The Musée Grévin is a waxwork show. Your mind, at the word, flies instantly to the excellent exhibition founded by the worthy Mme Tussaud. And you think you know what waxworks mean. But you are wrong. The Musée Grévin contains the work of artists for a nation of artists.

Wax-modelled and retouched till it seems as near life as death is: this is what one sees at the Musée Grévin.

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

‘I hate museums,’ said Edward.

‘This isn’t a museum,’ Vincent said, and truly; ‘it’s just waxworks.’

‘All right,’ said Edward, indifferently. And they went.

They reached the doors of the Musée in the grey-brown dusk of a February evening.

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

‘It’s very like Mme Tussaud’s,’ said Edward.

‘Yes,’ Vincent said; ‘isn’t it?’

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

‘By Jove!’ said Edward. ‘That’s jolly good.’

‘Yes,’ said Vincent again; ‘isn’t it?’

Edward’s interest grew.

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

Vincent led the way to an arched door labelled ‘Galerie de la Revolution.’

There one saw—almost in the living, suffering body—poor Marie Antoinette in prison in the Temple, her little son on his couch of rags, the rats eating from his platter, the brutal Simon calling to him from the grated window. One almost heard the words: ‘Holà, little Capet!—are you asleep?’

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

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

‘Fine, eh?’ said Vincent.

‘Yes,’ said Edward; ‘it’s wonderful.’

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

‘What’s the matter with them all?’ said Edward.

‘Look at the window,’ said Vincent.

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

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

‘Mine de Lamballe. Good thing, isn’t it?’ said Vincent.

‘It’s altogether too much of a good thing,’ said Edward. ‘Look here—I’ve had enough of this.’

‘Oh, you must just see the Catacombs,’ said Vincent; ‘nothing gruesome, you know. Only early Christians being married and baptized, and all that.’

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

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

‘Yes,’ said Vincent, for the third time; ‘isn’t it?’

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

‘Come,’ he said; ‘I’ve had enough.’

‘Come on, then,’ said Vincent.

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

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

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

‘I don’t know,’ said Edward. ‘Let’s have a vermouth, shall we? There’s something uncanny about those wax things. They’re like life—but they’re much more like death. Suppose they moved? I don’t feel at all sure that they don’t move, when the lights are all out and there’s no one there.’

He laughed.

‘I suppose you were never frightened, Vincent?’

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

‘How?’

‘Why, I kept thinking, “Suppose it should move.” It was so like life. And if it did move, of course it would have been because it was alive, and I ought to have been glad, because the man was my friend. But all the same, if he had moved I should have gone mad.’

‘Yes,’ said Edward, ‘that’s just exactly it.’

Vincent called for a second absinthe.

‘But a dead body’s different to waxworks,’ he said. ‘I can’t understand anyone being frightened of them.’

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

‘I bet you five pounds I do!’

‘Done,’ said Edward, briskly. ‘At least, I would if you’d got five pounds.’

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

‘You might shut up about that,’ said Edward, shortly.

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

‘Vincent!’

‘No offence, old boy. One may as well call a spade a spade. Of course, you’ve got tons of moral courage and all that. But you are afraid of the dark—and waxworks!’

‘Are you trying to quarrel with me?’

‘Heaven in its mercy forbid. But I bet you wouldn’t spend a night in the Musée Grévin and keep your senses.’

‘What’s the stake?’

‘Anything you like.’

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

‘Done,’ said Vincent. ‘But you’ll never do it. Keep your hair on. Besides, you’re off home.’

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

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

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

Vincent dined lightly, but with conscientious care—and as he dined he thought. Something might be done by tying a string to one of the figures and making it move when Edward was going through that impossible night among the effigies that are so like life—so like death. Something that was not the devil said:

‘You may frighten him out of his wits.’

And the devil answered: ‘Nonsense; do him good. He oughtn’t to be such a schoolgirl.’

Anyway, the five pounds might as well be won tonight as any other night. He would take a greatcoat, sleep sound in the place of horrors, and the people who opened it in the morning to

sweep and dust would bear witness that he had passed the night there. He thought he might trust to the French love of a sporting wager to keep him from any bother with the authorities.

So he went in among the crowd, and looked about among the waxworks for a place to hide in. He was not in the least afraid of these lifeless images. He had always been able to control his nervous tremors in his time. He was not even afraid of being frightened, which, by the way, is the worst fear of all.

As one looks at the room of the poor little Dauphin one sees a door to the left. It opens out of the room on to blackness. There were few people in the gallery. Vincent watched, and, in a moment when he was alone, stepped over the barrier and through this door. A narrow passage ran round behind the wall of the room. Here he hid, and when the gallery was deserted he looked out across the body of little Capet to the gaoler at the window. There was a soldier at the window too. Vincent amused himself with the fancy that this soldier might walk round the passage at the back of the room and tap him on the shoulder in the darkness. Only the head and shoulders of the soldier and the gaoler showed, so, of course, they could not walk, even if they were something that was not waxwork.

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

‘Thorough the beggars are, even the parts that don’t show—artists, upon my word,’ said Vincent, and went back to his doorway, thinking of the hidden carving behind the capitals of Gothic cathedrals.

But the idea of the soldier who might come behind him in the dark stuck in his mind. Though still a few visitors strolled through the gallery, the closing hour was near. He supposed it would be quite dark. Then—and now he had allowed himself to be amused by the thought of something that should creep up behind him in the dark—he might possibly be nervous in that passage round which, if waxworks could move, the soldier might have come.

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

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

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

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

‘Chuck it and go home,’ said common sense.

‘I’m hanged if I do,’ said Vincent.

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

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

draughty passage where the soldier with legs kept intruding on the darkness that is always behind one.

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

‘That’s all right,’ said Vincent, and composed himself to sleep.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Bah!’ he said, and he said it aloud. ‘The silly things are only wax. Who’s afraid?’

His voice sounded loud in the silence that lives with the wax people.

‘They’re only wax,’ he said again, and touched with his foot contemptuously the crouching figure in the mantle.

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

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

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

‘But why did he think you would be afraid?’

He told her why.

‘And then what happened?’

‘Why, I suppose he thought there was no time like the present—for his five pounds, you know—and he hid among the waxworks. And I missed my train, and, I thought, there was no

time like the present. In fact, dear, I thought if I waited I should have time to make certain of funking it. So I hid there, too. And I put on my big black capuchon, and sat down right in one of the waxwork groups—they couldn't see me from the gallery where you walk. And after they put the lights out I simply went to sleep. And I woke up—and there was a light, and I heard someone say:

“They're only wax,” and it was Vincent. He thought I was one of the wax people till I looked at him; and I expect he thought I was one of them even then, poor chap. And his match went out, and while I was trying to find my railway reading lamp that I'd got near me he began to scream. And the night-watchman came running. And now he thinks everyone in the asylum is made of wax, and he screams if they come near him. They have to put his food near him while he's asleep. It's horrible. I can't help feeling as if it were my fault somehow.'

'Of course it's not,' said Rose. 'Poor Vincent! Do you know, I never *really* liked him.'

There was a pause. Then she said:

'But how was it *you* weren't frightened?'

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

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

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

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