

St. Catherine's Eve

By Mrs. Belloc Lowndes

I

"In this matter of the railway James Mottram has proved a false friend, a very traitor to me!"

Charles Nagle's brown eyes shone with anger; he looked loweringly at his companions, and they, a beautiful young woman and an old man dressed in the sober garb of a Catholic ecclesiastic of that day, glanced at one another apprehensively.

All England was then sharply divided into two camps, the one composed of those who welcomed with enthusiasm the wonderful new invention which obliterated space, the other of those who dreaded and abhorred the coming of the railroads.

Charles Nagle got up and walked to the end of the terrace. He stared down into the wooded combe, or ravine, below, and noted with sullen anger the signs of stir and activity in the narrow strip of wood which till a few weeks before had been so still, so entirely remote from even the quiet human activities of 1835.

At last he turned round, pirouetting on his heel with a quick movement, and his good looks impressed anew each of the two who sat there with him. Eighty years ago beauty of line and colour were allowed to tell in masculine apparel, and this young Dorset squire delighted in fine clothes. Though November was far advanced it was a mild day, and Charles Nagle wore a bright blue coat, cut, as was then the fashion, to show off the points of his elegant figure—of his slender waist and his broad shoulders; as for the elaborately frilled waistcoat, it terminated in an India muslin stock, wound many times round his neck. He looked a foppish Londoner rather than what he was—an honest country gentleman who had not journeyed to the capital for some six years, and then only to see a great physician.

"'Twas a most unneighbourly act on the part of James—he knows it well enough, for we hardly see him now!" He addressed his words more particularly to his wife, and he spoke more gently than before.

The old priest—his name was Dorriforth—looked uneasily from his host to his hostess. He felt that both these young people, whom he had known from childhood, and whom he loved well, had altered during the few weeks which had gone by since he had last seen them. Rather—he mentally corrected himself—it was the wife, Catherine, who was changed. Charles Nagle was much the same; poor Charles would never be other, for he belonged to the mysterious company of those who, physically sound, are mentally infirm, and shunned by their more fortunate fellows.

But Charles Nagle's wife, the sweet young woman who for so long had been content, nay glad, to share this pitiful exile, seemed now to have escaped, if not in body then in mind, from the place where her sad, monotonous duty lay.

She did not at once answer her husband; but she looked at him fixedly, her hand smoothing nervously the skirt of her pretty gown.

Mrs. Nagle's dress also showed a care and research unusual in that of the country lady of those days. This was partly no doubt owing to her French blood—her grandparents had been *émigrés*—and to the fact that Charles liked to see her in light colours. The gown she was now wearing on this mild November day was a French flowered silk, the spoil of a smuggler who

pursued his profitable calling on the coast hard by. The short, high bodice and puffed sleeves were draped with a scarf of Buckinghamshire lace which left, as was the fashion of those days, the wearer's lovely shoulders bare.

"James Mottram," she said at last, and with a heightened colour, "believes in progress, Charles. It is the one thing concerning which you and your friend will never agree.

"Friend?" he repeated moodily. "Friend! James Mottram has shown himself no friend of ours. And then I had rights in this matter—am I not his heir-at-law? I could prevent my cousin from touching a stone, or felling a tree, at the Eype. But 'tis his indifference to my feelings that angers me so. Why, I trusted the fellow as if he had been my brother!

"And James Mottram," said the old priest authoritatively, "has always felt the same to you, Charles. Never forget that! In all but name you are brothers. Were you not brought up together? Had I not the schooling of you both as lads?" He spoke with a good deal of feeling; he had noticed—and the fact disturbed him—that Charles Nagle spoke in the past tense when referring to his affection for the absent man.

"But surely, sir, you cannot approve that this iron monster should invade our quiet neighbourhood?" exclaimed Charles impatiently.

Mrs. Nagle looked at the priest entreatingly. Did she by any chance suppose that he would be able to modify her husband's violent feeling?

"If I am to say the truth, Charles," said Mr. Dorriforth mildly, "and you would not have me conceal my sentiments, then I believe the time will come when even you will be reconciled to this marvellous invention. Those who surely know declare that, thanks to these railroads, our beloved country will soon be all cultivated as is a garden. Nay, perhaps others of our Faith, strangers, will settle here

"Strangers?" repeated Charles Nagle sombrely, "I wish no strangers here. Even now there are too many strangers about." He looked round as if he expected those strangers of whom the priest had spoken to appear suddenly from behind the yew hedges which stretched away, enclosing Catherine Nagle's charming garden, to the left of the plateau on which stood the old manor-house.

"Nay, nay," he repeated, returning to his grievance, "never had I expected to find James Mottram a traitor to his order. As for the folk about here, they're bewitched! They believe that this puffing devil will make them all rich! I could tell them different; but, as you know, there are reasons why I should not."

The priest bent his head gravely. The Catholic gentry of those days were not on comfortable terms with their neighbours. In spite of the fact that legally they were now "emancipated," any malicious person could still make life intolerable to them. The railway mania was at its beginnings, and it would have been especially dangerous for Charles Nagle to take, in an active sense, the unpopular side.

In other parts of England, far from this Dorset countryside, railroads had brought with them a revival of trade. It was hoped that the same result would follow here, and a long strip of James Mottram's estate had been selected as being peculiarly suitable for the laying down of the iron track which was to connect the nearest town with the sea.

Unfortunately the land in question consisted of a wood which formed the boundary-line where Charles Nagle's property marched with that of his kinsman and co-religionist, James Mottram; and Nagle had taken the matter very ill indeed. He was now still suffering, in a physical sense, from the effects of the violent fit of passion which the matter had induced, and which even his wife, Catherine, had not been able to allay. .

As he started walking up and down with caged, impatient steps, she watched him with an uneasy, anxious glance. He kept shaking his head with a nervous movement, and he stared angrily across the ravine to the opposite hill, where against the skyline the large mass of Eype Castle, James Mottram's dwelling-place, stood four-square to the high winds which swept up from the sea.

Suddenly he again strode over to the edge of the terrace: "I think I'll go down and have a talk to those railroad fellows," he muttered uncertainly.

Charles knew well that this was among the forbidden things—the things he must not do; yet occasionally Catherine, who was, as the poor fellow dimly realized, his mentor and guardian, as well as his outwardly submissive wife, would allow him to do that which was forbidden.

But to-day such was not her humour. "Oh, no, Charles," she said decidedly, "you cannot go down to the wood! You must stay here and talk to Mr. Dorriforth."

"They were making hellish noises all last night; I had no rest at all," Nagle went on inconsequently. "They were running their puffing devil up and down, 'The Bridport Wonder'—that's what they call it, reverend sir," he turned to the priest.

Catherine again looked up at her husband, and their old friend saw that she bit her lip as if checking herself in impatient speech. Was she losing the sweetness of her temper, the evenness of disposition the priest had ever admired in her, and even revered?

Mrs. Nagle knew that the steam-engine had been run over the line for the first time the night before, for James Mottram and she had arranged that the trial should take place then rather than in the daytime. She also knew that Charles had slept through the long dark hours, those hours during which she had lain wide awake by his side listening to the strange new sounds made by the Bridport Wonder. Doubtless one of the servants had spoken of the matter in his hearing.

She frowned, then felt ashamed. "Charles," she said gently, "would it not be well for me to go down to the wood and discover when these railroad men are going away? They say in the village that their work is now done."

"Yes," he cried eagerly. "A good idea, love! And if they're going off at once, you might order that a barrel of good ale be sent down to them. I'm informed that that's what James has had done this very day. Now I've no wish that James should appear more generous than I!"

Catherine Nagle smiled, the indulgent kindly smile which a woman bestows on a loved child who suddenly betrays a touch of that vanity which is, in a child, so pardonable.

She went into the house, and in a few moments returned with a pink scarf wound about her soft dark hair—hair dressed high, turned back from her forehead in the old pre-Revolution French mode, and not, as was then the fashion, arranged in stiff curls.

The two men watched her walking swiftly along the terrace till she sank out of their sight, for a row of stone steps led down to an orchard planted with now leafless pear and apple trees, and surrounded with a quickset hedge. A wooden gate, with a strong lock to it, was set in this closely clipped hedge. It opened on a steep path which, after traversing two fields, terminated in the beech-wood where now ran the iron track of the new railroad.

Catherine Nagle unlocked the orchard gate, and went through on to the field path. And then she slackened her steps.

For hours, nay, for days, she had been longing for solitude, and now, for a brief space, solitude was hers. But, instead of bringing her peace, this respite from the companionship of Charles and of Mr. Dorriforth brought increased tumult and revolt.

She had ardently desired the visit of the old priest, but his presence had bestowed, instead of solace, fret and discomfort. When he fixed on her his mild, penetrating eyes, she felt as if he

were dragging into the light certain secret things which had been so far closely hidden within her heart, and concerning which she had successfully dulled her once sensitive conscience.

The waking hours of the last two days had each been veined with torment. Her soul sickened as she thought of the morrow, St. Catherine's Day, that is, her feast-day. The *émigrés*, Mrs. Nagle's own people, had in exile jealousy kept up their own customs, and to Charles Nagle's wife the twenty-fifth day of November had always been a day of days, what her birthday is to a happy Englishwoman. Even Charles always remembered the date, and in concert with his faithful manservant, Collins, sent to London each year for a pretty jewel. The housefolk, all of whom had learnt to love their mistress, and who helped her loyally in her difficult, sometimes perilous, task, also made of the feast a holiday.

But now, on this St. Catherine's Eve, Mrs. Nagle told herself that she was at the end of her strength. And yet only a month ago—so she now reminded herself piteously—all had been well with her; she had been strangely, pathetically happy a month since; content with all the conditions of her singular and unnatural life. . . .

Suddenly she stopped walking. As if in answer to a word spoken by an invisible companion she turned aside, and, stooping, picked a weed growing by the path. She held it up for a moment to her cheek, and then spoke aloud. "Were it not for James Mottram," she said slowly, and very clearly, "I, too, should become mad."

Then she looked round in sudden fear. Catherine Nagle had never before uttered, or permitted another to utter aloud in her presence, that awful word. But she knew that their neighbours were not so scrupulous. One cruel enemy, and, what was especially untoward, a close relation, Mrs. Felwake, own sister to Charles Nagle's dead father, often uttered it. This lady desired her son to reign at Edgecombe; it was she who in the last few years had spread abroad the notion that Charles Nagle, in the public interest, should be asylumed.

In his own house, and among his own tenants, the slander was angrily denied. When Charles was stranger, more suspicious, moodier than usual, those about him would tell one another that "the squire was ill to-day," or that "the master was ailing." That he had a mysterious illness was admitted. Had not a famous London doctor persuaded Mr. Nagle that it would be dangerous for him to ride, even to walk outside the boundary of his small estate,—in brief, to run any risks which might affect his heart? He had now got out of the way of wishing to go far afield; contentedly he would pace up and down for hours on the long terrace which overhung the wood—talking, talking, talking, with Catherine on his arm.

But he was unselfish—sometimes. "Take a walk, dear heart, with James," he would say, and then Catherine Nagle and James Mottram would go out and make their way to some lonely farmhouse or cottage where Mottram had estate business. Yet during these expeditions they never forgot Charles, so Catherine now reminded herself sorely,—nay, it was then that they talked of him the most, discussing him kindly, tenderly, as they went. . . .

Catherine walked quickly on, her eyes on the ground. With a feeling of oppressed pain she recalled the last time she and Mottram had been alone together. Bound for a distant spot on the coast, they had gone on and on for miles, almost up to the cliffs below which lay the sea. Ah, how happy, how innocent she had felt that day!

Then they had come to a stile—Mottram had helped her up, helped her down, and for a moment her hand had lain and fluttered in his hand. . . .

During the long walk back, each had been very silent; and Catherine—she could not answer for her companion—when she had seen Charles waiting for her patiently, had felt a pained, shamed

beat of the heart. As for James Mottram, he had gone home at once, scarce waiting for good-nights.

That evening—Catherine remembered it now with a certain comfort—she had been very kind to Charles; she was ever kind, but she had then been kinder than usual, and he had responded by becoming suddenly clearer in mind than she had known him to be for a long time. For some days he had been the old Charles—tender, whimsical, gallant, the Charles with whom, at a time when every girl is in love with love, she had alack! fallen in love. Then once more the cloud had come down, shadowing a dreary waste of days—dark days of oppression and of silence, alternating with sudden bursts of unreasonable and unreasoning rage.

James Mottram had come, and come frequently, during that time of misery. But his manner had changed. He had become restrained, as if watchful of himself; he was no longer the free, the happy, the lively companion he had used to be. Catherine scarcely saw him out of Charles's presence, and when they were by chance alone they talked of Charles, only of Charles and of his unhappy condition, and of what could be done to better it.

And now James Mottram had given up coming to Edgecombe in the old familiar way; or rather—and this galled Catherine shrewdly—he came only sufficiently often not to rouse remark among their servants and humble neighbours.

Catherine Nagle was on the edge of the wood, and looking about her she saw with surprise that the railway men she had come down to see had finished work for the day. There were signs of their immediate occupation, a fire was still smouldering, and the door of one of the shanties they occupied was open. But complete stillness reigned in this kingdom of high trees. To the right and left, as far as she could see, stretched the twin lines of rude iron rails laid down along what had been a cart-track, as well as a short cut between Edgecombe Manor and Eype Castle. A dun drift, to-day's harvest of dead leaves, had settled on the rails; even now it was difficult to follow their course.

As she stood there, about to turn and retrace her steps, Catherine suddenly saw James Mottram advancing quickly towards her, and the mingled revolt and sadness which had so wholly possessed her gave way to a sudden, overwhelming feeling of security and joy.

She moved from behind the little hut near which she had been standing, and a moment later they stood face to face.

James Mottram was as unlike Charles Nagle as two men of the same age, of the same breed, and of the same breeding could well be. He was shorter, and of sturdier build, than his cousin; and he was plain, whereas Charles Nagle was strikingly handsome. Also his face was tanned by constant exposure to sun, salt-wind, and rain; his hair was cut short, his face shaven.

The very clothes James Mottram wore were in almost ludicrous contrast to those which Charles Nagle affected, for Mottram's were always of serviceable homespun. But for the fact that they and he were scrupulously clean, the man now walking by Catherine Nagle's side might have been a prosperous farmer or bailiff instead of the owner of such large property in those parts as made him, in spite of his unpopular faith, lord of the little world about him.

On his plain face and strong, sturdy figure Catherine's beautiful eyes dwelt with unconscious relief. She was so weary of Charles's absorption in his apparel, and of his interest in the hundred and one fal-lals which then delighted the cosmopolitan men of fashion.

A simple, almost childish gladness filled her heart. Conscience, but just now so insistent and disturbing a familiar, vanished for a space, nay more, assumed the garb of a meddling busybody who seeks to discover harm where no harm is.

Was not James Mottram Charles's friend, almost, as the old priest had said, Charles's brother? Had she not herself deliberately chosen Charles in place of James when both young men had been in ardent pursuit of her—James's pursuit almost wordless, Charles's conducted with all the eloquence of the poet he had then set out to be?

Mottram, seeing her in the wood, uttered a word of surprise. She explained her presence there. Their hands scarce touched in greeting, and then they started walking side by side up the field path.

Mottram carried a stout ash stick. Had the priest been there he would perchance have noticed that the man's hand twitched and moved restlessly as he swung his stick about; but Catherine only became aware that her companion was preoccupied and uneasy after they had gone some way.

When, however, the fact of his unease seemed forced upon her notice, she felt suddenly angered. There was a quality in Mrs. Nagle that made her ever ready to rise to meet and conquer circumstance. She told herself, with heightened colour, that James Mottram should and must return to his old ways—to his old familiar footing with her. Anything else would be, nay was, intolerable.

"James,"—she turned to him frankly—"why have you not come over to see us lately as often as you did? Charles misses you sadly, and so do I. Prepare to find him in a bad mood to-day. But just now he distressed Mr. Dorriforth by his unreasonableness touching the railroad." She smiled and went on lightly, "He said that you were a false friend to him—a traitor!"

And then Catherine Nagle stopped and caught her breath. God! Why had she said that? But Mottram had evidently not caught the sinister word, and Catherine in haste drove back conscience into the lair whence conscience had leapt so suddenly to her side.

"Maybe I ought, in this matter of the railroad," he said musingly, "to have humoured Charles. I am now sorry I did not do so. After all, Charles may be right—and all we others wrong. The railroad may not bring us lasting good!"

Catherine looked at him surprised. James Mottram had always been so sure of himself in this matter; but now there was dejection, weariness in his voice; and he was walking quickly, more quickly up the steep incline than Mrs. Nagle found agreeable. But she also hastened her steps, telling herself, with wondering pain, that he was evidently in no mood for her company.

"Mr. Dorriforth has already been here two days," she observed irrelevantly.

"Aye, I know that. It was to see him I came to-day; and I will ask you to spare him to me for two or three hours. Indeed, I propose that he should walk back with me to the Eype. I wish him to witness my new will. And then I may as well go to confession, for it is well to be shriven before a journey, tho' ~h for my part I feel ever safer on sea than land!"

Mottram looked straight before him as he spoke.

"A journey?" Catherine repeated the words in a low, questioning tone. There had come across her heart a feeling of such anguish that it was as though her body instead of her soul were being wrenched asunder. In her extremity she called on pride—and pride, ever woman's most loyal friend, flew to her aid.

"Yes," he repeated, still staring straight in front of him, "I leave to-morrow for Plymouth. I have had letters from my agent in Jamaica which make it desirable that I should return there without delay." He dug his stick into the soft earth as he spoke.

James Mottram was absorbed in himself, in his own desire to carry himself well in his fierce determination to avoid betraying what he believed to be his secret. But Catherine Nagle knew nothing of this. She almost thought him indifferent.

They had come to a steep part of the incline, and Catherine suddenly quickened her steps and passed him, so making it impossible that he could see her face. She tried to speak, but the commonplace words she desired to say were strangled, at birth, in her throat.

“Charles will not mind; he will not miss me as he would have missed me before this unhappy business of the railroad came between us,” Mottram said lamely.

She still made no answer; instead she shook her head with an impatient gesture. Her silence made him sorry. After all, he had been a good friend to Catherine Nagle—so much he could tell himself without shame. He stepped aside on to the grass, and striding forward turned round and faced her.

The tears were rolling down her cheeks; but she threw back her head and met his gaze with a cold, almost a defiant look. “You startled me greatly,” she said breathlessly, “and took me so by surprise, James! I am grieved to think how Charles—nay, how we shall both—miss you. It is of Charles I think, James; it is for Charles I weep——”

As she uttered the lying words, she still looked proudly into his face as if daring him to doubt her. “But I shall never forget—I shall ever think with gratitude of your great goodness to my poor Charles. Two years out of your life—that’s what it’s been, James. Too much—too much by far!” She had regained control over her quivering heart, and it was with a wan smile that she added, “But we shall miss you, dear, kind friend.”

Her smile stung him. “Catherine,” he said sternly, “I go because I must—because I dare not stay. You are a woman and a saint, I a man and a sinner. I’ve been a fool and worse than a fool. You say that Charles to-day called me false friend, traitor! Catherine—Charles spoke more truly than he knew.”

His burning eyes held her fascinated. The tears had dried on her cheeks. She was thirstily absorbing the words as they fell now slowly, now quickly, from his lips.

But what was this he was saying? “Catherine, do you wish me to go on?” Oh, cruel! Cruel to put this further weight on her conscience! But she made a scarcely perceptible movement of assent—and again he spoke.

“Years ago I thought I loved you. I went away, as you know well, because of that love. You had chosen Charles—Charles in many ways the better fellow of the two. I went away thinking myself sick with love of you, but it was false—only my pride had been hurt. I did not love you as I loved myself. And when I got clear away, in a new place, among new people”—he hesitated and reddened darkly—“I forgot you! I vow that when I came back I was cured—cured if ever a man was! It was of Charles, not of you, Catherine, that I thought on my way home. To me Charles and you had become one. I swear it!” He repeated: “To me you and Charles were one.

He waited a long moment, and then, more slowly, he went on, as if pleading with himself—with her: “You know what I found here in place of what I had left? I found Charles a——”

Catherine Nagle shrank back. She put up her right hand to ward off the word, and Mottram, seizing her hand, held it in his with a convulsive clasp. “’Twas not the old feeling that came back to me—that I again swear, Catherine. ’Twas something different—something infinitely stronger—something that at first I believed to be all noble——”

He stopped speaking, and Catherine Nagle uttered one word—a curious word. “When?” she asked, and more urgently again she whispered, “When?”

“Long before I knew!” he said hoarsely. “At first I called the passion that possessed me by the false name of ‘friendship.’ But that poor hypocrisy soon left me! A month ago, Catherine, I found myself wishing—I’ll say this for myself, it was for the first time—that Charles was dead.

And then I knew for sure what I had already long suspected—that the time had come for me to go—”

He dropped her hand, and stood before her, abased in his own eyes, but one who, if a criminal, had had the strength to be his own judge and pass heavy sentence on himself.

“And now, Catherine—now that you understand why I go, you will bid me God-speed. Nay, more”—he looked at her, and smiled wryly—“if you are kind, as I know you to be kind, you will pray for me, for I go from you a melancholy, as well as a foolish man.”

She smiled a strange little wavering smile, and Mottram was deeply moved by the gentleness with which Catherine Nagle had listened to his story. He had been prepared for an averted glance, for words of cold rebuke—such words as his own long-dead mother would surely have uttered to a man who had come to her with such a tale.

They walked on for a while, and Catherine again broke the silence by a question which disturbed her companion. “Then your agent’s letter was not really urgent, James?”

“The letters of an honest agent always call for the owner,” he muttered evasively.

They reached the orchard gate. Catherine held the key in her hand, but she did not place it in the lock—instead she paused awhile. “Then there is no special urgency?” she repeated. “And James—forgive me for asking it—are you, indeed, leaving England because of this—this matter of which you have just told me?”

He bent his head in answer.

Then she said deliberately: “Your conscience, James, is too scrupulous. I do not think that there is any reason why you should not stay. When Charles and I were in Italy,” she went on in a toneless, monotonous voice, “I met some of those young noblemen who in times of pestilence go disguised to nurse the sick and bury the dead. It is that work of charity, dear friend, which you have been performing in our unhappy house. You have been nursing the sick—nay, more, you have been tending”—she waited, then in a low voice she added—“the dead—the dead that are yet alive.”

Mottram’s soul leapt into his eyes. “Then you bid me stay?” he asked.

“For the present,” she answered, “I beg you to stay. But only so if it is indeed true that your presence is not really required in Jamaica.”

“I swear, Catherine, that all goes sufficiently well there.” Again he fixed his honest, ardent eyes on her face.

And now James Mottram was filled with a great exultation of spirit. He felt that Catherine’s soul, incapable of even the thought of evil, shamed and made unreal the temptation which had seemed till just now one which could only be resisted by flight. Catherine was right; he had been over scrupulous.

There was proof of it in the blessed fact that even now, already, the poison which had seemed to possess him, that terrible longing for another man’s wife, had left him, vanishing in that same wife’s pure presence. It was when he was alone—alone in his great house on the hill, that the devil entered into him, whispering that it was an awful thing such a woman as was Catherine, sensitive, intelligent, and in her beauty so appealing, should be tied to such a being as was Charles Nagle—poor Charles, whom every one, excepting his wife and one loyal kinsman, called mad. And yet now it was for this very Charles that Catherine asked him to stay, for the sake of that unhappy, distraught man to whom he, James Mottram, recognized the duty of a brother.

“We will both forget what you have just told me,” she said gently, and he bowed his head in reverence.

They were now on the last step of the stone stairway leading to the terrace.

Mrs. Nagle turned to her companion; he saw that her eyes were very bright, and that the rose-red colour in her cheeks had deepened as if she had been standing before a great fire.

As they came within sight of Charles Nagle and of the old priest, Catherine put out her hand. She touched Mottram on the arm—it was a fleeting touch, but it brought them both, with beating hearts, to a stand. “James,” she said, and then she stopped for a moment—a moment that seemed to contain æons of mingled rapture and pain—“one word about Mr. Dorriforth.” The commonplace words dropped them back to earth. “Did you wish him to stay with you till to-morrow? That will scarcely be possible, for to-morrow is St. Catherine’s Day.”

“Why, no,” he said quickly. “I will not take him home with me to-night. All my plans are now changed. My will can wait”—he smiled at her—“and so can my confession.”

“No, no!” she cried almost violently. “Your confession must not wait, James—”

“Aye, but it must,” he said, and again he smiled. “I am in no mood for confession, Catherine.” He added in a lower tone, “you’ve purged me of my sin, my dear—I feel already shriven.”

Shame of a very poignant quality suddenly seared Catherine Nagle’s soul. “Go on, you, she said breathlessly, though to his ears she seemed to speak in her usual controlled and quiet tones, “I have some orders to give in the house. Join Charles and Mr. Dorriforth. I will come out presently.”

James Mottram obeyed her. He walked quickly forward. “Good news, Charles,” he cried. “These railway men whose presence so offends you go for good to-morrow! Reverend sir, accept my hearty greeting.”

Catherine Nagle turned to the right and went into the house. She hastened through the rooms in which, year in and year out, she spent her life, with Charles as her perpetual, her insistent companion. She now longed for a time of recollection and secret communion, and so she instinctively made for the one place where no one, not even Charles, would come and disturb her.

Walking across the square hall, she ran up the broad staircase leading to the gallery, out of which opened the doors of her bedroom and of her husband’s dressing-room. But she went swiftly past these two closed doors, and made her way along a short passage which terminated abruptly with a faded red baize door giving access to the chapel.

Long, low-ceilinged and windowless, the chapel of Edgecombe Manor had remained unaltered since the time when there were heavy penalties attached both to the celebration of the sacred rites and to the hearing of Mass. The chapel depended for what fresh air it had on a narrow door opening straight on to ladder-like stairs leading down directly and out on to the terrace below. It was by this way that the small and scattered congregation gained access to the chapel when the presence of a priest permitted of Mass being celebrated there.

Catherine went up close to the altar rails, and sat down on the arm-chair placed there for her sole use. She felt that now, when about to wrestle with her soul, she could not kneel and pray. Since she had been last in the chapel, acting sacristan that same morning, life had taken a great stride forward, dragging her along in its triumphant wake, a cruel and yet a magnificent conqueror.

Hiding her face in her hands, she lived again each agonized and exquisite moment she had lived through as there had fallen on her ears the words of James Mottram’s shamed confession. Once more her heart was moved to an exultant sense of happiness that he should have said these things to her—of happiness and shrinking shame. . . .

But soon other thoughts, other and sterner memories were thrust upon her. She told herself the bitter truth. Not only had she led James Mottram into temptation, but she had put all her woman's wit to the task of keeping him there. It was her woman's wit—but Catherine Nagle called it by a harsher name—which had enabled her to make that perilous rock on which she and James Mottram now stood heart to heart together, appear, to him at least, a spot of sanctity and safety. It was she, not the man who had gazed at her with so ardent a belief in her purity and honour, who was playing traitor—and traitor to one at once confiding and defenceless. . . .

Then, strangely, this evocation of Charles brought her burdened conscience relief. Catherine found sudden comfort in remembering her care, her tenderness for Charles. She reminded herself fiercely that never had she allowed anything to interfere with her wifely duty. Never? Alas! she remembered that there had come a day, at a time when James Mottram's sudden defection had filled her heart with pain, when she had been unkind to Charles. She recalled his look of bewildered surprise, and how he, poor fellow, had tried to sulk—only a few hours later to come to her, as might have done a repentant child, with the words, "Have I offended you, dear love?" And she who now avoided his caresses had kissed him of her own accord with tears, and cried, "No, no, Charles, you never offend me—you are always good to me!"

There had been a moment to-day, just before she had taunted James Mottram with being over-scrupulous, when she had told herself that she could be loyal to both of these men she loved and who loved her, giving to each a different part of her heart.

But that bargain with conscience had never been struck; while considering it she had found herself longing for some convulsion of the earth which should throw her and Mottram in each other's arms.

James Mottram traitor? That was what she was about to make him be. Catherine forced herself to face the remorse, the horror, the loathing of himself which would ensue.

It was for Mottram's sake, far more than in response to the command laid on her by her own soul, that Catherine Nagle finally determined on the act of renunciation which she knew was being immediately required of her.

When Mrs. Nagle came out on the terrace the three men rose ceremoniously. She glanced at Charles, even now her first thought and her first care. His handsome face was overcast with the look of gloomy preoccupation which she had learnt to fear, though she knew that in truth it signified but little. At James Mottram she did not look, for she wished to husband her strength for what she was about to do.

Making a sign to the others to sit down, she herself remained standing behind Charles's chair. It was from there that she at last spoke, instinctively addressing her words to the old priest.

"I wonder," she said, "if James has told you of his approaching departure? He has heard from his agent in Jamaica that his presence is urgently required there."

Charles Nagle looked up eagerly. "This is news indeed!" he exclaimed. "Lucky fellow! Why, you'll escape all the trouble that you've put on us with regard to that puffing devil!" He spoke more cordially than he had done for a long time to his cousin.

Mr. Dorriforth glanced for a moment up at Catherine's face. Then quickly he averted his eyes.

James Mottram rose to his feet. His limbs seemed to have aged. He gave Catherine a long, probing look.

"Forgive me," he said deliberately. "You mistook my meaning. The matter is not as urgent, Catherine, as you thought." He turned to Charles, "I will not desert my friends—at any rate not for the present. I'll face the puffing devil with those to whom I have helped to acquaint him!"

But Mrs. Nagle and the priest both knew that the brave words were a vain boast. Charles alone was deceived; and he showed no pleasure in the thought that the man who had been to him so kind and so patient a comrade and so trusty a friend was after all not leaving England immediately.

“I must be going back to the Eype now.” Mottram spoke heavily; again he looked at Mrs. Nagle with a strangely probing, pleading look. “But I’ll come over to-morrow morning—to Mass. I’ve not forgotten that tomorrow is St. Catherine’s Day—that this is St. Catherine’s Eve.”

Charles seemed to wake out of a deep abstraction. “Yes, yes,” he said heartily. “Tomorrow is the great day! And then, after we ye had breakfast I shall be able to consult you, James, about a very important matter, that new well they’re plaguing me to sink in the village.”

For the moment the cloud had again lifted; Nagle looked at his cousin with all his old confidence and affection, and in response James Mottram’s face worked with sudden emotion.

“I’ll be quite at your service, Charles,” he said, “quite at your service!”

Catherine stood by. “I will let you out by the orchard gate,” she said. “No need for you to go round by the road.”

They walked, silently, side by side, along the terrace and down the stone steps. When in the leafless orchard, and close to where they were to part, he spoke:

“You bid me go—at once?” Mottram asked the question in a low, even tone; but he did not look at Catherine, instead his eyes seemed to be following the movements of the stick he was digging into the ground at their feet.

“I think, James, that would be best.” Even to herself the words Mrs. Nagle uttered sounded very cold.

“Best for me?” he asked. Then he looked up, and with sudden passion, “Catherine!” he cried. “Believe me, I know that I can stay! Forget the wild and foolish things I said. No thought of mine shall wrong Charles—I swear it solemnly. Catherine!—do not bid me leave you. Cannot you trust my honour?” His eyes held hers, by turns they seemed to become beseeching and imperious.

Catherine Nagle suddenly threw out her hands with a piteous gesture. “Ah! James,” she said, “I cannot trust my own—” And as she thus made surrender of her two most cherished possessions, her pride and her womanly reticence, Mottram’s face—the plain-featured face so exquisitely dear to her—became transfigured. He said no word, he made no step forward, and yet Catherine felt as if the whole of his being was calling her, drawing her to him. . . .

Suddenly there rang through the still air a discordant cry: “Catherine! Catherine!”

Mrs. Nagle sighed, a long convulsive sigh. It was as though a deep pit had opened between herself and her companion. “That was Charles,” she whispered, “poor Charles calling me. I must not keep him waiting.”

“God forgive me,” Mottram said huskily, “and bless you, Catherine, for all your goodness to me.” He took her hand in farewell, and she felt the firm, kind grasp to be that of the kinsman and friend, not that of the lover.

Then came over her a sense of measureless and most woeful loss. She realized for the first time all that his going away would mean to her—of all that it would leave her bereft. He had been the one human being to whom she had been able to bring herself to speak freely. Charles had been their common charge, the link as well as the barrier between them.

“You’ll come to-morrow morning?” she said, and she tried to withdraw her hand from his. His impersonal touch hurt her.

“I’ll come to-morrow, and rather early, Catherine. Then I’ll be able to confess before Mass.” He was speaking in his usual voice, but he still held her hand, and she felt his grip on it tightening, bringing welcome hurt.

“And you’ll leave—?”

“For Plymouth to-morrow afternoon,” he said briefly. He dropped her hand, which now felt numbed and maimed, and passed through the gate without looking back.

She stood a moment watching him as he strode down the field path. It had suddenly become, from day, night,—high time for Charles to be indoors.

Forgetting to lock the gate, she turned and retraced her steps through the orchard, and so made her way up to where her husband and the old priest were standing awaiting her.

As she approached them, she became aware that something going on in the valley below was absorbing their close attention. She felt glad that this was so.

“There it is!” cried Charles Nagle angrily. “I told you that they’d begin their damned practice again to-night!”

Slowly through the stretch of open country which lay spread to their right, the Bridport Wonder went puffing its way. Lanterns had been hung in front of the engine, and as it crawled sinuously along it looked like some huge monster with myriad eyes. As it entered the wood below, the dark barrel-like body of the engine seemed to give a bound, a lurch forward, and the men that manned it laughed out suddenly and loudly. The sound of their uncouth mirth floated upwards through the twilight.

“James’s ale has made them merry!” exclaimed Charles, wagging his head. “And he, going through the wood, will just have met the puffing devil. I wish him the joy of the meeting!”

II

It was five hours later. Mrs. Nagle had bidden her reverend guest good night, and she was now moving about her large, barely furnished bedchamber, waiting for her husband to come upstairs.

The hours which had followed James Mottram’s departure had seemed intolerably long. Catherine felt as if she had gone through some terrible physical exertion which had left her worn out—stupefied. And yet she could not rest. Even now her day was not over; Charles often grew restless and talkative at night. He and Mr. Dorriforth were no doubt still sitting talking together downstairs.

Mrs. Nagle could hear her husband’s valet moving about in the next room, and the servant’s proximity disturbed her.

She waited awhile and then went and opened the door of the dressing-room. “You need not sit up, Collins,” she said.

The man looked vaguely disturbed. “I fear that Mr. Nagle, madam, has gone out of doors,” he said.

Catherine felt dismayed. The winter before Charles had once stayed out nearly all night.

“Go you to bed, Collins,” she said. “I will wait up till Mr. Nagle comes in, and I will make it right with him.”

He looked at her doubtfully. Was it possible that Mrs. Nagle was unaware of how much worse than usual his master had been the last few days?

“I fear Mr. Nagle is not well to-day,” he ventured. “He seems much disturbed tonight.”

“Your master is disturbed because Mr. Mottram is again leaving England for the Indies.” Catherine forced herself to say the words. She was dully surprised to see how quietly news so momentous to her was received by her faithful servant.

“That may be it,” said the man consideringly, “but I can’t help thinking that the master is still much concerned about the railroad. I fear that he has gone down to the wood to-night.”

Catherine was startled. “Oh, surely he would not do that, Collins?” She added in a lower tone, “I myself locked the orchard gate.”

“If that is so,” he answered, obviously relieved, “then with your leave, madam, I’ll be off to bed.”

Mrs. Nagle went back into her room, and sat down by the fire, and then, sooner than she had expected to do so, she heard a familiar sound. It came from the chapel, for Charles was fond of using that strange and secret entry into his house.

She got up and quietly opened her bedroom door.

From the hail below was cast up the dim light of the oil-lamp which always burnt there at night, and suddenly Catherine saw her husband emerge from the chapel passage, and begin walking slowly round the opposite side of the gallery. She watched him with languid curiosity.

Charles Nagle was treading softly, his head bent as if in thought. Suddenly he stayed his steps by a half-moon table on which stood a large Chinese bowl filled with pot-pourri; and into this he plunged his hands, seeming to lave them in the dry rose-leaves. Catherine felt no surprise, she was so used to his strange ways; and more than once he had hidden things—magpie fashion—in that great bowl. She turned and closed her door noiselessly;

Charles much disliked being spied on.

At last she heard him go into his dressing-room. Then came the sounds of cupboard doors being flung open, and the hurried pouring out of water. . . . But long before he could have had time to undress, she heard the familiar knock.

She said feebly, “Come in,” and the door opened.

It was as she had feared; her husband had no thought, no intention, of going yet to bed. Not only was he fully dressed, but the white evening waistcoat he had been wearing had been changed by him within the last few moments for a waistcoat she had not seen before, though she had heard of its arrival from London. It was of cashmere, the latest freak of fashion. She also saw with surprise that his nankeen trousers were stained, as if he had been kneeling on damp ground. He looked very hot, his wavy hair lay damply on his brow, and he appeared excited, oppressively alive.

“Catherine!” he exclaimed, hurrying up to the place where she was standing near the fire. “You will bear witness that I was always and most positively averse to the railroad being brought here?” He did not wait for her to answer him. “Did I not always say that trouble would come of it—trouble to us all? Yet sometimes it’s an ill thing to be proved right.”

“Indeed it is, Charles,” she answered gently. “But let us talk of this to-morrow. It’s time for bed, my dear, and I am very weary.”

He was now standing by her, staring down into the fire.

Suddenly he turned and seized her left arm. He brought her unresisting across the room, then dragged aside the heavy yellow curtains which had been drawn before the central window.

“Look over there, Catherine,” he said meaningly. “Can you see the Eype? The moon gives but little light to-night, but the stars are bright. I can see a glimmer at yon window. They must be still waiting for James to come home.”

"I see the glimmer you mean," she said dully. "No doubt they leave a lamp burning all night, as we do. James must have got home hours ago, Charles." She saw that the cuff of her husband's coat was also covered with dark, damp stains, and again she wondered uneasily what he had been doing out of doors.

"Catherine?" Charles Nagle turned her round, ungently, and forced her to look up into his face. "Have you ever thought what 'twould be like to live at the Eype?"

The question startled her. She roused herself to refute what she felt to be an unworthy accusation. "No, Charles," she said, looking at him steadily. "God is my witness that at no time did I think of living at the Eype! Such a wish never came to me—"

"Nor to me!" he cried, "nor to me, Catherine! All the long years that James Mottram was in Jamaica the thought never once came to me that he might die, and I survive him. After all we were much of an age, he had but two years the advantage of me. I always thought that the boy—my aunt's son, curse him!—would get it all. Then, had I thought of it—and I swear I never did think of it—I should have told myself that any day James might bring a wife to the Eype—"

He was staring through the leaded panes with an intent, eager gaze. "It is a fine house, Catherine, and commodious. Larger, airier than ours—though perhaps colder," he added thoughtfully. "Cold I always found it in winter when I used to stay there as a boy—colder than this house. You prefer Edgcombe, Catherine? If you were given a choice is it here that you would live?" He looked at her, as if impatient for an answer.

"Every stone of Edgcombe, our home, is dear to me," she said solemnly. "I have never admired the Eype. It is too large, too cold for my taste. It stands too much exposed to the wind."

"It does! it does!" There was a note of regret in his voice. He let the curtain fall and looked about him rather wildly.

"And now, Charles," she said, "shall we not say our prayers and retire to rest."

"If I had only thought of it," he said, "I might have said my prayers in the chapel. But there was much to do. I thought of calling you, Catherine, for you make a better sacristan than I. Then I remembered Boney—poor little Boney crushed by the miller's dray—and how you cried all night, and that though I promised you a far finer, cleverer dog than that poor old friend had ever been. Collins said, 'Why, sir, you should have hid the old dog's death from the mistress till the morning!' A worthy fellow, Collins. He meant no disrespect to me. At that time, d'you remember, Collins had only been in my service a few months?"

It was an hour later. From where she lay in bed, Catherine Nagle with dry, aching eyes stared into the fire, watching the wood embers turn from red to grey. By her side, his hand in hers, Charles slept the dreamless, heavy slumber of a child.

Scarcely breathing, in her anxiety lest he should wake, she loosened her hand, and with a quick movement slipped out of bed. The fire was burning low, but Catherine saw everything in the room very clearly, and she threw over her night-dress a long cloak, and wound about her head the scarf which she had worn during her walk to the wood.

It was not the first time Mrs. Nagle had risen thus in the still night and sought refuge from herself and from her thoughts in the chapel; and her husband had never missed her from his side.

As she crept round the dimly lit gallery she passed by the great bowl of pot-pourri by which Charles Nagle had lingered, and there came to her the thought that it might perchance be well for her to discover, before the servants should have a chance of doing so, what he had doubtless hidden there.

Catherine plunged both her hands into the scented rose-leaves, and she gave a sudden cry of pain—for her fingers had closed on the sharp edge of a steel blade. Then she drew out a narrow

damascened knife, one which her husband, taken by its elegant shape, had purchased long before in Italy.

Mrs. Nagle's brow furrowed in vexation—Collins should have put the dangerous toy out of his master's reach. Slipping the knife into the deep pocket of her cloak, she hurried on into the unlit passage leading to the chapel.

Save for the hanging lamp, which since Mr. Dorriforth had said Mass there that morning signified the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, the chapel should have been in darkness. But as Catherine passed through the door she saw, with sudden, uneasy amazement, the farther end of the chapel in a haze of brightness.

Below the altar, striking upwards from the floor of the sanctuary, gleamed a corona of light. Charles—she could not for a moment doubt that it was Charles's doing—had moved the six high, heavy silver candlesticks which always stood on either side of the altar, and had placed them on the ground.

There, in a circle, the wax candles blazed, standing sentinel-wise about a dark, round object which was propped up on a pile of altar-linen carefully arranged to support it.

Fear clutched at Catherine's heart—such fear as even in the early days of Charles's madness had never clutched it. She was filled with a horrible dread, and a wild, incredulous dismay.

What was the Thing, at once so familiar and so terribly strange, that Charles had brought out of the November night and placed with so much care below the altar?

But the thin flames of the candles, now shooting up, now guttering low, blown on by some invisible current of strong air, gave no steady light.

Staying still close to the door, she sank down on her knees, and desiring to shut out, obliterate, the awful sight confronting her, she pressed both her hands to her eyes. But that availed her nothing.

Suddenly there rose up before Catherine Nagle a dreadful scene of that great Revolution drama of which she had been so often told as a child. She saw, with terrible distinctness, the severed heads of men and women borne high on iron pikes, and one of these blood-streaked, livid faces was that of James Mottram—the wide-open, sightless eyes, his eyes. . . .

There also came back to her as she knelt there, shivering with cold and anguish, the story of a French girl of noble birth who, having bought her lover's head from the executioner, had walked with it in her arms to the village near Paris where stood his deserted château.

Slowly she rose from her knees, and with her hands thrown out before her, she groped her way to the wall and there crept along, as if a precipice lay on her other side.

At last she came to the narrow oak door which gave on to the staircase leading into the open air. The door was ajar; it was from there that blew the current of air which caused those thin, fantastic flames to flare and gutter in the awful stillness.

She drew the door to, and went on her way, so round to the altar. In the now steadier light Catherine saw that the large missal lay open at the Office for the Dead.

She laid her hands with a blind instinct upon the altar, and felt a healing touch upon their palms. Henceforth—and Catherine Nagle was fated to live many long years—she remained persuaded that it was then there had come to her a shaft of divine light piercing the dark recesses of her soul. For it was at that moment that there came to her the conviction, and one which never faltered, that Charles Nagle had done no injury to James Mottram. And there also came to her then the swift understanding of what others would believe, were there to be found in the private chapel of Edgecombe Manor that which now lay on the ground behind her, close to her feet.

So understanding, Catherine suddenly saw the way open before her, and the dread thing which she must do if Charles were to be saved from a terrible suspicion—one which would undoubtedly lead to his being taken away from her and from all that his poor, atrophied heart held dear, to be asylumed.

With steps that did not falter, Catherine Nagle went behind the altar into the little sacristy, there to seek in the darkness an altar-cloth.

Holding the cloth up before her face she went back into the lighted chapel, and kneeling down, she uncovered her face and threw the cloth over what lay before her.

And then Catherine's teeth began to chatter, and a mortal chill overtook her. She was being faced by a new and to her a most dread enemy, for till to-night she and that base physical fear which is the coward's foe had never met. Pressing her hands together, she whispered the short, simple prayer for the Faithful Departed that she had said so often and, she now felt, so unmeaningly. Even as she uttered the familiar words, base Fear slunk away, leaving in his place her soul's old companion, Courage, and his attendant, Peace.

She rose to her feet, and opening wide her eyes forced herself to think out what must be done by her in order that no trace of Charles's handiwork should remain in the chapel.

Snuffing out the wicks, Catherine lifted the candlesticks from the ground and put them back in their accustomed place upon the altar. Then, stooping, she forced herself to wrap up closely in the altar-cloth that which must be her burden till she found James Mottram's headless body where Charles had left it, and placing that same precious burden within the ample folds of her cloak, she held it with her left hand and arm closely pressed to her bosom. .

With her right hand she gathered up the pile of stained altar-linen from the ground, and going once more into the sacristy she thrust it into the oak chest in which were kept the Lenten furnishings of the altar. Having done that, and walking slowly lest she should trip and fall, she made her way to the narrow door Charles had left open to the air, and going down the steep stairway was soon out of doors in the dark and windy night.

Charles had been right, the moon gave but little light; enough, however, so she told herself, for the accomplishment of her task.

She sped swiftly along the terrace, keeping close under the house, and then more slowly walked down the stone steps where last time she trod them Mottram had been her companion, his living lips as silent as were his dead lips now.

The orchard gate was wide open, and as she passed through there came to Catherine Nagle the knowledge why Charles on his way back from the wood had not even latched it; he also, when passing through it, had been bearing a burden. . . .

She walked down the field path; and when she came to the steep place where Mottram had told her that he was going away, the tears for the first time began running down Catherine's face. She felt again the sharp, poignant pain which his then cold and measured words had dealt her, and the blow this time fell on a bruised heart. With a convulsive gesture she pressed more closely that which she was holding to her desolate breast.

At night the woodland is strangely, curiously alive. Catherine shuddered as she heard the stuffless sounds, the tiny rustlings and burrowings of those wild, shy creatures whose solitude had lately been so rudely invaded, and who now of man's night made their day. Their myriad presence made her human loneliness more intense than it had been in the open fields, and as she started walking by the side of the iron rails, her eyes fixed on the dark drift of dead leaves which dimly marked the path, she felt solitary indeed, and beset with vague and fearsome terrors.

At last she found herself nearing the end of the wood. Soon would come the place where what remained of the cart-track struck sharply to the left, up the hill towards the Eype.

It was there, close to the open, that Catherine Nagle's quest ended; and that she was able to accomplish the task she had set herself, of making that which Charles had rendered incomplete, complete as men, considering the flesh, count completeness.

Within but a few yards of safety, James Mottram had met with death; a swift, merciful death, due to the negligence of an engine-driver not only new to his work but made blindly merry by Mottram's gift of ale.

Charles Nagle woke late on the morning of St. Catherine's Day, and the pale November sun fell on the fully dressed figures of his wife and Mr. Dorriforth standing by his bedside.

But Charles, absorbed as always in himself, saw nothing untoward in their presence.

"I had a dream!" he exclaimed. "A most horrible and gory dream this night! I thought I was in the wood; James Mottram lay before me, done to death by that puffing devil we saw slithering by so fast. His head nearly severed—*à la guillotine*, you understand, my love?—from his poor body—" There was a curious, secretive smile on Charles Nagle's pale, handsome face.

Catherine Nagle gave a cry, a stifled shriek of horror.

The priest caught her by the arm and led her to the couch which stood across the end of the bed.

"Charles," he said sternly, "this is no light matter. Your dream—there's not a doubt of it—was sent you in merciful preparation for the awful truth. Your kinsman, your almost brother, Charles, was found this morning in the wood, dead as you saw him in your dream."

The face of the man sitting up in bed stiffened—was it with fear or grief? "They found James Mottram dead?" he repeated with an uneasy glance in the direction of the couch where crouched his wife. "And his head, most reverend sir—what of his head?"

"James Mottram's body was terribly mangled. But his head," answered the priest solemnly, "was severed from his body, as you saw it in your dream, Charles. A strangely clean cut, it seems—"

"Ay," said Charles Nagle. "That was in my dream too; if I said nearly severed, I said wrong."

Catherine was now again standing by the priest's side.

"Charles," she said gravely, "you must now get up; Mr. Dorriforth is only waiting for you, to say Mass for James's soul."

She made the sign of the cross, and then, with her right hand shading her sunken eyes, she went on, "My dear, I entreat you to tell no one—not even faithful Collins—of this awful dream. We want no such tale spread about the place—"

She looked at the old priest entreatingly, and he at once responded. "Catherine is right, Charles. We of the Faith should be more careful with regard to such matters than are the ignorant and superstitious."

But he was surprised to hear the woman by his side say insistently, "Charles, if only to please me, vow that you will keep most secret this dreadful dream. I fear that if it should come to your Aunt Felwake's ears—"

"That I swear it shall not," said Charles sullenly.

And he kept his word.