

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You said—?"

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

"I was saying that I went to church last Sunday week."

"Why?"

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

"Marcus!" exclaimed Lady Mansford.

She pursed her lips.

"I don't go to St. Joseph's. Poor Sophy! I'm sorry for her."

"I lunched with Lady Sophia after the service."

"Did you? Is n't it sad?"

"Sad! I don't quite understand?" said Malling, interrogatively.

"The change in him. Of course people say it's drink. Such nonsense! But they must say something, must n't they?"

"Is Mr. Harding so very much changed?"

"Do you mean to say you did n't notice it?"

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

"He's transformed—simply. He might have risen to anything, with his energy, his ambition, and his connections. And now! But the worst of it is no one can make out why it is. Even Sophia and Inginglass—my husband, you know!—have n't an idea. And it gets worse every day. Last Sunday I hear his sermon was too awful, a mere muddle of adjectives, such as one hears in Hyde

Park, I believe. I never liked Marcus particularly. I always thought him too autocratic, too determined to dominate. He had that poor little Mr. Chichester—his curate—completely under his thumb. Mr. Chichester could n't call his soul his own. He worshiped Marcus. But now they say even he is beginning to think that his god is of clay. What can it be? Do you think Marcus is losing his mind?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Was it? Curiosity, I suppose. It certainly can't have been the intellectual merit of the sermon. I heard it was quite deplorable. But last Sunday's, I was told, was worse still. No continuity at all, and the church not full. People say the curate, Mr. Chichester, who often preaches in the evening, is making a great effect, completely cutting out his rector. And he used to be almost unbearably dull."

"Will you have a quail?"

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

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

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

"Quite another man, does he?"

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

"You mean—the contrast?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

The ignorant outsider, the hastily skeptical, of course would say that there could have been no result. Malling, knowing more, knew better.

He had seen strange cases of temporary confusion of a man's will brought about by sittings, of what had seemed temporary change even of a man's nature. When a hitherto sane man goes mad he often becomes the opposite of what he was. Those whom he formerly loved he specially singles out for hatred. That which he delighted to do he shrinks from with horror. Once good-natured, he is now of an evil temper, once gentle, he is fiercely obstinate, once gay, he cowers and weeps. So Malling had known a man, while retaining his sanity, to be transformed by the apparently trivial fact of sitting at a table with a friend, and placing his hands upon it with the hands of another man. He himself had sat with an Oxford friend,—who in later sittings became entranced,—and at the very first experiment this man had said to him, "It's so strange, now that I am sitting with you like this I feel filled with hatred toward you." This hatred, which had come upon this man at every successive sitting, had always faded away when the sitting was over. But was it certain that the feelings generated in sittings never persisted after they were broken up? Was it certain that in every case the waters that had been mysteriously troubled settled into their former stillness?

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

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

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

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

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

And when would that moment come?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There were irony and bitterness in her voice.

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

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

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

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

"It's very good of you."

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

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

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

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

"Marcus might have come in," she added. "But of course he would n't—or could n't."

"Does n't he care for pictures?"

She slightly shrugged her shoulders.

"He used to. But I don't know that he does now.",

"I suppose he has a tremendous amount to do."

"He used to do much more at Liverpool. If a man wishes to come to the front he must n't sit in an armchair with folded hands."

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

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

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

"Are you?" she said.

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

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

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

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

"And by that you mean—?"

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

"You are ambitious," he said.

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

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

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

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

"What is that?"

"That we women are fools—fools!"

"For being unselfish?"

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

She made a gesture that was surely one of despair.

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

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

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

"Very often they don't understand."

"Oh, please say never!" she exclaimed.

"They never understand."

Suddenly Malling resolved on a very bold stroke.

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

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

"Because I do not understand."

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

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

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

“To evening church?”

“Yes, yes.”

She got up.

“You are going?”

“I must. Forgive me!” She held out her hand.

“But—“No, don’t come with me, please.”

“If I go to St. Joseph’s to-morrow, afterward may I see you again?”

“If you think it’s worth while.”

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

VI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The subject was somewhat akin to that of the first sermon of Mr. Harding which Malling had heard. The rector then had preached on self-knowledge. The curate, now, preached on hypocrisy. Incidentally he destroyed his rector's sermon, flung it away on the scrap-heap, and passed on.

This was not done viciously, but it was done relentlessly. Indeed, that was the note of the whole sermon. It was relentless, as truth is relentless, as death is relentless. And besides being terribly true, it was imaginative. But the preacher almost succeeded in conveying the impression to his congregation that what is generally called imagination is really vision, that the true imagination is seeing what is, but is often hidden, knowing what is, but is often unknown. The latter part of the sermon struck Malling as very unusual, even as very daring.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Here a strange thing occurred.

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

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

to follow on into the darkness of the open country, not to proceed beyond his own home, of which now he saw the lights, but to make an effort to see the face of the other before the garden gate was reached.

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

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

He had opened the door with a key.

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

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

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

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

For a long while he remained where he was on the path of the garden. The night deepened about him. A long way off, at the other end of the village, a clock chimed the hours. In the cottages the lights were extinguished. The few loungers disappeared from the one long street vanishing over the snow. And the man never moved. A numb terror possessed him. Yet, despite his many faults and his life of evil, he had never been physically a coward. Always the light shone steadily from the window of his study, making a patch of yellow upon the snow. Always the

occupant of the room must be seated tranquilly there, like an owner. For no figure had risen, had repassed across the unshuttered space.

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

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

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

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

The man at the table lifted his head. He laid down the pen, blotted the book in which he had been writing, shut it up, clasped it, locked it with a tiny key, and put it carefully into a drawer of the table, which also he locked. He got up, stood for an instant by the table with one hand upon it, then turned slowly toward the window, smiling, as men smile to themselves when they are thinking of their own ingenuities.

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

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

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

When Malling got home, he asked himself why Chichester had made such an impression upon his mind. His story of the double, strange enough, no doubt, in a sermon, could not surely have come upon Malling with any of the force and the interest of the new. For years he had been familiar with tales of ghosts, of voices, of appearances at the hour of death, of doubles. Of course

in the sermon there had been a special application of the story. It had been very short. Chichester had suggested that if, as by a miracle, the average self-contented man could look at himself with the eyes of his soul full of subliminal self-knowledge and with the bodily eyes, he would be stricken down by a great horror.

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

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

VII

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

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

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

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

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

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

She hesitated for an instant. Then she said:

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

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

"And my husband's sermon?"

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

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

"You think he needs one?"

"He has a tiresome malady, I understand."

"What malady?"

"Does n't he suffer very much from nervous dyspepsia?"

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

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

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

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

"Why not?"

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

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

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

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

"He need n't be—now," she replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I think he will probably turn up."

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

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

"Thank you," said Chichester, very impersonally.

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

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

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

"The part about the man and his double."

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

"That was terrible," she said.

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

"One of them was this—"

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

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

"We are just going to begin it," she replied.

"We are talking about the sermon of last Sunday."

"Oh," rejoined the rector. He turned to Malling.

"Did you come to hear me preach again?"

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

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

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

Lady Sophia distributed cups for tea.

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

"Ah?" said the rector.

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

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

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

"Ah, indeed! And why not?" interrupted Chichester.

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

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

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

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

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

“It did n’t occur to you, I suppose, when composing your sermon to follow that train of thought?” said Malling to Chichester.

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

“That was your fault,” said Malling.

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

“Certainly; for making the narrative so vital and human.”

He addressed himself again to the curate.

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

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

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

“I took it as a man,” said Malling.

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

“How could a man’s double be a man?” said Lady Sophia.

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

He looked at Chichester.

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

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

“Tell me what the double’s existence would be, according to you,” he said. “Tell me.”

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

“Yes.”

“Had he been strong enough to stay—”

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

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

“Yes, you are right—you are right,” said Chichester.

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

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

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

“Troubled! Troubled!”

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

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

His piercing eyes went from Chichester to Harding.

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

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

“Yes, that was my end.”

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

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

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

He had done what he wished to do, and he was now ready for other activities. But he found it was not easy to switch his companions off onto another trail. Lady Sophia, now that he looked at her closely, he saw to be under the influence of fear, provoked doubtless by the subject they had

been discussing. Chichester, also, had a look as of fear in his eyes. As to the rector, he sat gazing at his curate, and there had come upon his countenance an expression of almost unnatural resolution, such as a coward's might wear if terror forced him into defiance.

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

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

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

"Yes."

"I have."

"And do you believe in them?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

"Nothing more than that?" said Lady Sophia.

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

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

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

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

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

He looked about the circle at his wife and Malling.

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

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

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

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

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

Malling got up to go.

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

"Oh, dear, *no*. My doctor recommends Tankerton on the Kentish coast. It seems the air there is extraordinary. When the tide is down it comes off the mud flats. A kind parishioner of mine—"

he turned slightly toward his wife: "Mrs. Amherst, Sophy—has a cottage there and has often offered me the use of it. I hope to accept her offer now."

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

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

VIII

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

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

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

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

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

"He is away, sir," said the fair Scotch parlor-maid.

"For long?"

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

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

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

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

"Thank you, Agnes," said Malling.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why?” asked Malling, as they shook hands.

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

He broke into a covering laugh.

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

As they descended, Malling remarked:

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

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

“Stepton.”

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

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

“I have n’t seen him.”

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

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

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

The question sounded anxious to Malling’s ears.

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

“Here is Minors.”

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

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

“I’ll go over presently and ask about him.”

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

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

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

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

“I should like nothing better,” said Malling. “Have n’t you been sleeping well lately?”

“Very badly. We had better take our coats.”

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

The two men paced slowly up and down. And again Malling was aware of words trembling upon the rector’s lips—words which he could not yet resolve frankly to utter. Whether it was the influence of the faintly sighing sea, of the almost sharply pure air, of the distant lights gleaming patiently, or whether an influence came out from the man beside him and moved him, Malling did not know; but he resolved to do a thing quite contrary to his usual practice. He resolved to try to force a thing on, instead of waiting till it came to him naturally. He became impatient, he who was generally a patient seeker.

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

“Chichester? Yes—yes. What of him?”

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

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

He spoke with a sort of despairing conviction. “What makes you think so?”

“It must. It cannot be otherwise—unless—”

He paused.

“Yes,” said Malling; “unless—”

“A thing almost impossible were to happen.” May I, without indiscretion, ask what that is?”

“Unless he were to leave St. Joseph’s, to go quite away.”

“Surely that would not be impossible!”

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

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

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

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

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

“He would not take it.”

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

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

“Why are you not so sure?”

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

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

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

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

“It is true. I did.”

“Then—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Perfectly,” said Malling.

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

Perhaps not,” said Malling, quietly. “Let us see.”

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

“I will tell you everything,” he exclaimed. From the first I have felt as if you were the man to assist me, if any man could. I had always, since I was an undergraduate at Oxford,—I was a Magdalen man,—been interested in psychical matters, and followed carefully all the proceedings

of the Society for Psychical Research. I had also at that time,—in Oxford,—made some experiments with my college friends, chiefly in connection with will power. My influence seemed to be specially strong. But I need not go into all that. After leaving Oxford and taking orders, for a long time I gave such matters up. I feared, if I showed my strong interest in psychical research, especially if I was known to attend seances or anything of that kind, it might be considered unsuitable in a clergyman, and might injure my prospects. It was not until Henry Chichester came to St. Joseph's that I was tempted again into paths which I had chosen to consider forbidden to me. Chichester tempted me! Chichester tempted me!"

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

"Such a gentle, yielding man as he was!"

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

"Illegitimate?"

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

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

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

"You must know that although I had entirely given up the occult practices—that may not be the exact term, but you will understand what I mean—I had indulged in at Oxford, I had never relaxed my deep, perhaps my almost morbid interest in the efforts that were being made by scientists and others to break through the barrier dividing us on earth from the spirit world. Although I had chosen the career of a clergyman,—alas! I looked upon the church, I suppose, as little more than a career!—I was not a very faithful man. I had many doubts which, as clergymen must, I concealed. By nature I suppose I had rather an incredulous mind. Not that I was a skeptic, but I was sometimes a doubter. Rather than faith, I should have much preferred to have knowledge, exact knowledge. Often I even felt ironical when confronted with the simple faith we clergymen should surely encourage, sustain, and humbly glory in, whereas with skepticism, even when openly expressed, I always felt some part of myself to be in secret sympathy. I continued to study works, both English and foreign, on psychical research. I followed the experiments of Lodge, William James, and others. Myers's great work on human personality was forever at my elbow. And the longer I was debarred—self-debarred because of my keen ambition and my determination to do nothing that could ever make me in any way suspect in the eyes of those to

whom I looked confidently for preferment—from continuing the practices which had such a fascination for me, the more intensely I was secretly drawn toward them. The tug at my soul was at last almost unbearable. It was then I looked toward Chichester, and resolved to take him into my confidence—to a certain extent.

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

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

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

Chichester, though at first startled, was fascinated by this untruth, and, to cut the matter short, I persuaded him to begin with me a series of secret sittings, in which I proposed to try to impart to him, to infuse into him, as it were, some of my undoubted power—the power which he daily saw me exercising in the pulpit and over the minds of men in my intercourse with them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Nothing is stranger, I think, Mr. Malling, than the fascination of a sitting. Even when nothing, or scarcely anything, happens, the mind, the whole nature seems to be mysteriously grasped and held. New senses in you seem to be released. Something is alert which is never alert—or, at all events, never alert in the same way—in other moments of life. One seems to become inexplicably different. Chichester was aware of all this. At the first sitting nothing happened, and I feared Chichester would wish to give the matter up. But, no! When we rose from our chairs late

in the night he acknowledged that he had never known two hours to pass so quickly before. At following sittings there were slight manifestations such as, I suppose, are seldom absent from such affairs,—perfectly trivial to you, of course, movements of the table, rappings, gusts of what seemed cold air, and so forth. All that is not worth talking about, and I don't mean to trouble you further with it. My difficulty is, when so little, apparently, took place, to make you understand the tremendous thing that did happen, that must have been happening gradually during our sittings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Certainly.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Now, Chichester was a saint. Hitherto I had neither been troubled by my own grave shortcomings nor by Chichester’s excellence of character. I had always felt myself set far above him by my superior mental faculties and my greater will power over the crowd, though, alas! not always over my own demon. I began to writhe now under the thought of Chichester’s crystal purity and of my own besmirched condition of soul. All self-confidence departed from me; but I endeavored, of course, to conceal this from the world, and especially from Chichester. With the world for a time no doubt I succeeded. But with Chichester—did I ever succeed? Could I ever succeed with such an one as he had become? It seemed to me, it seems to me far more terribly now, that nothing I did, or was, escaped him. He attended mentally, spiritually even, to

everything that made up me. At first I felt this curiously, then anxiously, then often with bitter contempt and indignation, sometimes with a great melancholy, a sort of wide-spreading sadness in which I was involved as in an icy sea. I can never make you fully understand what I felt, how this mental and spiritual observation of Chichester affected me. It—it simply ate me away, Malling! It simply ate me away!

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

"And how long did you continue the sittings?"

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

"For a long while."

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

"On Westminster Bridge? No."

"Have you ceased from them now?"

The rector shifted as if in physical distress.

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

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

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

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

"Why not?"

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

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

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

"Yes?"

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

"I did notice it."

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

"What do you say?"

Malling's exclamation was sharp.

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

He broke off. He got up from his seat.

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

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

"It's better here," he said. "Better here! Mr. Malling, forgive me, but just then a hideous knowledge seemed really to catch me by the throat. Chichester is turning my wife against me. There is a terrible change in her. She is beginning to observe me through Chichester's eyes. Till quite recently she worshiped me. She noticed the alteration in me, of course,—every one did,—"

but she hated Chichester for his attitude toward me. Till quite lately she hated him. Now she no longer hates him; for she begins to think he is right. At first I think she believed the excuse I put forward for my strange transformation.”

“Do you mean your nervous affection?”

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He spoke with profound conviction.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Some one else might tackle him.”

“Who?” cried out Mr. Harding.

“Some man with authority.”

“Do you mean ecclesiastical authority?”

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

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

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

