

The Perfume of Egypt

By C. W. Leadbeater

It is a curious life, that of a man in chambers, though very pleasant in many ways. Its great charm is its absolute liberty—the entire freedom to go out and come in, or *not* to go out and come in, exactly as one pleases. But it is terribly lonely. Probably most people remember Dickens's ghastly tale (founded, I believe, on fact) of a man who was struck by apoplexy when on the point of opening his door, and lay propped up against it for a whole year, until at the expiration of that time it was broken open, and his skeleton fell into the arms of the locksmith. I do not think I am a nervous man, but I confess that during my residence in chambers that story haunted me at times; and indeed, quite apart from such unusual horrors, there is a wide field of uncomfortable possibility in being left so entirely to oneself.

All the most unpleasant things that happen to people, both in fiction and real life, seem to occur when they are alone; and though no doubt the talented American author is right when he 'thanks a merciful heaven that the unendurable extreme of agony happens always to man the unit, and never to man the mass,' one feels that it is probably easier to re-echo his sentiment heartily when one is not the unit in question. On the other hand, when a man in chambers locks his door on a winter night and settles down cosily by the fire for an evening's reading, he has a sense of seclusion and immunity from interruption only to be equalled by that of a man who has sported his oak in a top set in college.

Just so had I¹ settled down—not to reading, however, but to writing—on the evening on which occurred the first of the chain of events that I am about to relate. In fact, I was writing a book—my first book—*On the Present State of the Law on Conveyancing*. I had published several essays on various aspects of the subject, and these had been so well received by high legal authorities, that I was emboldened to present my views in a more ambitious form. It was to this work, then, that I was applying myself with all a young author's zeal on the evening in question; and my reason for mentioning this fact is to show the subject on which my thoughts were fixed with a special intentness—one far enough, surely, from suggesting anything like romantic or unusual adventure.

I had just paused, I remember, to consider the exact wording of a peculiarly knotty sentence, when suddenly there came over me that feeling which I suppose all of us have experienced at one time or another—the feeling that I was not alone—that there was some one else in the room. I knew that my door was locked, and that the idea was therefore absurd; yet the impression was so strong that I instinctively half-rose from my chair and glanced hurriedly round. There was nothing visible, however, and with a half-laugh at my foolishness I was turning to my sentence again, when I became conscious of a faint but very peculiar odour in the room. It seemed familiar to me, yet for some few moments I was unable to identify it; then it flashed across my mind where I had met with it before, and my surprise was profound, as will be readily understood when I explain.

¹ The narrator of this remarkable series of incidents (whom I have called Mr. Thomas Keston) is—or rather was—a barrister of considerable repute in London. I have thought it best to leave him to tell his own story in his own words, reserving comments until the end.—C. W. L.

I had spent the long vacation of the preceding year in wandering about Egypt, peering into odd nooks and corners, and trying to make myself acquainted with the true life of the country—keeping as far as possible out of the beaten track and away from bands of tourists. While in Cairo I had the good fortune to make the acquaintance of a certain Sheikh (so he was called, though I am unable to say whether he had any right to the title) who proved to be a perfect mine of information as to ancient manners and customs, and the antiquities of the place generally—as regards relics of the glory of the mediæval Caliphs, I mean, not the *real* antiquities of the old Egyptian dynasties. My servant warned me to beware of this man, and said he had the reputation of being a magician and dealing extensively with the evil one; however, I always found him very friendly and obliging, and he certainly pointed out to me many objects of interest that I should inevitably have missed but for him.

One day, going to call on him at an unusual hour, I was struck on entering his room by a most peculiar odour. It was altogether unlike anything I had ever smelt before—indescribably rich and sweet—almost oppressively so—and yet its effects seemed stimulating and exhilarating. I was so much pleased with it that I pressed the Sheikh strongly either to give me a little of it or tell me where I could obtain it; but to my surprise he refused courteously but firmly to do either. All he would say was that it was a sacred perfume, used only in certain incantations; that its manufacture was a secret handed down from the remotest ages and known only to a chosen few; and that not all the gold in the world would ever buy a single grain of it.

Naturally this excited my curiosity immensely, but he would give me no further information either as to the scent itself or the purpose for which he had been using it. Sitting talking with him for an hour or so, my garments became permeated with its alluring fragrance, and when I returned to my hotel my servant, in brushing my coat, perceived it and started back with horror. Startled out of his usual impassivity and imperturbable courtesy, he asked hurriedly:

“Effendi, where have you been? How comes this devil-scent upon your clothes?”

“What do you mean?” said I. “What is the smell that excites you so strangely?”

“O sir, be careful!” replied my man, almost weeping. “You do not know, you do not believe; you English do not understand the awful power of the old magic of Egypt. I do not know where you have been, but O sir! never go there again, for you have been in terrible danger. Only magicians use this scent, and no magician can make it for himself; it is prepared by devils, and for every phial there must be a human sacrifice, so we call it virgin’s blood.”

“Nonsense, Mastapha,” I said; “you cannot expect me to believe such a tale as that. Cannot you get me some of this mysterious substance?”

“Not for the world,” answered Mustapha, with every appearance of mortal dread upon his countenance. “No one can get it—no one, I assure you! and I dare not touch it for my life, even if they could. Effendi, keep away from these things, for your soul’s sake.”

I laughed at his fear for me, but there could be no doubt that he was in deadly earnest; and it is certainly true that I could find no perfume in the least like that which I remembered so well, though I tried every scent-merchant in Cairo.

When I say that it was this mysterious aroma—faint, but quite unmistakable—that greeted my nostrils in my own chambers in London on that memorable night, it will be seen that I had good reason to be surprised. What could it mean? Was it anyhow possible that the smell could have lingered in some article of clothing? Obviously not, for had it done so I must certainly have discovered the fact in much less time than the fourteen or fifteen months that had elapsed. Then whence could it come? For I was well convinced that nothing in the least like it could be obtained in England. The problem appeared so difficult that when I could no longer perceive the

odour I was half inclined to doubt whether after all it, might not have been a hallucination; and I turned to my work again, resolved to throw it entirely off my mind.

I worked out the knotty sentence to my satisfaction, and had written perhaps a page more, when quite suddenly and without warning I felt again, more strongly than ever, that unpleasant consciousness of some other presence in the room; but this time, before I could turn to look, I felt—distinctly felt—a soft breath or puff of wind on the back of my neck, and heard a faint sigh. I sprang from my chair with an inarticulate cry, and looked wildly round the room, but there was nothing unusual to be seen—no trace remained of my mysterious visitant. No trace, did I say? Even in the moment that passed while I was regaining my self-possession there stole again upon my astonished sense that strange subtle perfume of ancient eastern magic!

It would be folly to deny that I was seriously startled. I rushed to the door and tried it—shook it vigorously; but it was locked, exactly as I had left it. I turned to the bedroom; there was no one there. I then searched both the rooms thoroughly looking under bed, sofas, and tables, and opening every cupboard or box large enough to hold even a cat; still there was nothing. I was completely puzzled. I sat down and tried to think the matter out, but the more I thought the less could I see my way to any rational solution of these occurrences.

At length I decided to shake off their influence for the time, and postpone all consideration of them until the morning. I tried to resume my work, but I was out of tune for writing—my mind had been too much disturbed. The haunting consciousness of another presence would not leave me; that soft sad sigh seemed yet sounding in my ears, and its unutterable sorrow provoked a feeling of sympathetic depression. After a few unavailing efforts I gave up the attempt to write, threw myself into an arm-chair by the fire, and began to read instead.

Though simple enough, I believe, in most of my habits, I am rather a Sybarite about my reading; for that purpose I always use the most comfortable arm-chair that money can procure, with that most blessed of inventions, the 'Literary Machine,' to hold my book at exactly the right angle, shade the light from my face and concentrate it on the page, and give me a desk always ready to my hand if I wish to make notes.

In this luxurious manner, then, I settled myself down on this occasion, choosing as my book Montaigne's *Essays*, in the hope that their cleverness and marvellous flexibility of style might supply just the mental tonic that I felt I needed. Ignore them as I might, however, I had still as I read two under-currents of consciousness—one of that ever-haunting presence, and the other of occasional faint waftings of the perfume of Egypt.

I suppose I had been reading for about half an hour when a stronger whiff than ever greeted my nostrils, and at the same time a slight rustle caused me to raise my eyes from my book. Judge of my astonishment when I saw, not five yards from me, seated at the table from which I had so lately risen, and apparently engaged in writing, the figure of a man! Even as I looked at him the pen fell from his hand, he rose from the chair, threw upon me a glance which seemed to express bitter disappointment and heart-rending appeal, and—vanished!

Too much stupefied even to rise, I sat staring at the spot where he had stood, and rubbed my eyes mechanically, as though to clear away the last relics of some horrible dream. Great as the shock had been, I was surprised to find, as soon as I was able to analyse my sensations, that they were distinctly those of relief; and it was some minutes before I could comprehend this. At last it flashed across me that the haunting sense of an unseen presence was gone, and then for the first time I realised how terrible its oppression had been. Even that strange magical odour was rapidly fading away, and in spite of the startling sight I had just seen, I had a sense of freedom such as a man feels when he steps out of some dark dungeon into the full bright sunlight.

Perhaps it was this feeling more than anything else that served to convince me that what I had seen was no delusion—that there had really been a presence in the room all the time which had at last succeeded in manifesting itself, and now was gone. I forced myself to sit still and recall carefully all that I had seen—even to note it down on the paper which lay before me on the desk of my literary machine.

First, as to the personal appearance of my ghostly visitor, if such he were. His figure was tall and commanding, his face expressing great power and determination, but showing also traces of a reckless passion and possible latent brutality that certainly gave on the whole the impression of a man rather to be feared and avoided than loved. I noticed more particularly the firm setting of his lips, because running down from the under one there was a curious white scar, which this action caused to stand out conspicuously; and then I recollected how this expression had broken and changed to one in which anger, despair, and appeal for help were strangely mingled with a certain dark pride that seemed to say:

“I have done all I could; I have played my last card and it has failed; I have never stooped to ask help from mortal man before, but I ask it from you now.”

A good deal, you will say, to make out of a single glance; but still that was exactly what it seemed to me to express; and, sinister though his appearance was, I mentally resolved that his appeal should not have been made in vain, if I could in any way discover who he was or what he wanted. I had never believed in ghosts before; I was not even quite sure that I did now; but clearly a fellow-creature in suffering was a brother to be helped, whether in the body or out of the body. With such thoughts as these all trace of fear vanished, and I honestly believe that if the spirit had reappeared I should have asked him to sit down and state his case as coolly as I should have met any other client.

I carefully noted down all the events of the evening, appended the hour and date, and affixed my signature; and then, happening to look up, my eye was caught by two or three papers lying on the floor. I had seen the wide sleeve of the long dark gown that the spectre wore sweep them down as he rose, and this for the first time reminded me that he had appeared to be writing at the table, and consequently might possibly have left there some clue to the mystery. At once I went and examined it; but everything was as I had left it, except that my pen lay where I had seen it fall from his hand. I picked up the papers from the floor, and then—my heart gave a great bound, for I saw among them a curious torn fragment which had certainly not been on my table before.

The eagerness with which I seized upon it may be imagined. It was a little oblong slip about five inches by three, apparently part either of a longer slip or a small book, for its edge at one end was extremely jagged, suggesting that considerable force had been required to tear it off; and indeed the paper was so thick and parchment-like that I could not wonder at it. The curious thing was that while the paper was much discoloured—water-stained and yellow with age—the jagged edge was white and fresh, looking as though it had been but just torn off. One side of the paper was entirely blank—or at least, if there ever had been any writing upon it, it had disappeared through the influence of time and damp; on the other were some blurred and indistinct characters, so faded as to be scarcely distinguishable, and, in a bold hand-writing in fresh black ink the two letters ‘Ra’.

Since the ink with which these letters were written corresponded exactly with that which I was in the habit of using, I could hardly doubt that they had been written at my table, and were the commencement of some explanation that the spectre had wished, but for some reason found himself unable, to make. Why he should have taken the trouble to bring his own paper with him I could not understand, but I inferred that probably some mystery was hidden beneath those

undecipherable yellow marks, so I turned all my attention to them. After patient and long-continued effort, however, I was unable to make anything like sense out of them, and resolved to wait for daylight.

Contrary to my expectations, I did *not* dream of my ghostly visitor that night, though I lay awake for some time thinking of him. In the morning I borrowed a magnifying glass from a friend, and resumed my examination. I found that there were two lines of writing, apparently in some foreign language, and then a curious mark, not unlike a monogram of some kind, standing as if in the place of a signature. But with all my efforts I could neither distinguish the letters of the monogram nor discover the language of the two lines of writing. As far as I could make it out it read thus:

Qomm uia daousa sita eo uia uiese quoam.

Some of these words had rather a Latin look; and I reflected that if the memorandum were as old as it appeared to be, Latin was a very likely language for it; but then I could make out nothing like a coherent sentence, so I was as far off from a solution as ever. I hardly knew what steps to take next. I shrank so much from speaking of the events of that evening that I could not bring myself to show the slip to any one else, lest it should lead to enquiries as to how it came into my possession; so I put it away carefully in my pocket-book, and for the time being my investigations seemed at a standstill.

I had not gained any fresh light on the subject, nor come to any definite conclusion about it, by the time the second incident of my story occurred, about a fortnight later. Again I was sitting at my writing-table early in the evening—engaged this time not upon my book but in the less congenial pursuit of answering letters. I dislike letter-writing, and am always apt to let my correspondence accumulate until the arrears assume formidable proportions, and insist on , attention; and then I devote a day or two of purgatory to it, and clear them up. This was one of these occasions, further accentuated by the fact that I had to decide which of three Christmas invitations I would accept.

It had been my custom for years always to spend Christmas when in England with my brother and his family, but this year his wife's health compelled them to winter abroad. I am conservative—absurdly so, I fear—about small things like this, and I felt that I should not really enjoy my Christmas at any house but his, so I cared little to choose in the matter. Here, however, were the three invitations; it was already the fourteenth of December, and I had not yet made up my mind. I was still debating the subject when I was disturbed by a loud knock at my door. On opening it I was confronted by a hand some sunburnt young fellow, whom at first I could not recognise; but when he called out in cheery tones:

“Why, Keston, old fellow, I believe you've forgotten me!”

I knew him at once as my old school-fellow Jack Fernleigh. He had been my fag at Eton, and I had found him such a jolly, good-hearted little fellow that our 'official' relation had glided into a firm friendship—a very rare occurrence; and though he was so far junior to me at Oxford that we were together there only a few months, still our acquaintance was kept up, and I had corresponded with him in a desultory sort of way ever since. I knew, consequently, that some years ago he had had some difference with his uncle (his only living relation) and had gone off to the West Indies to seek his fortune; and though our letters had been few and far between, I knew in a general way that he was doing very well there, so it was with no small surprise that I saw him standing at the door of my chambers in London.

I gave him a hearty welcome, set him down by the fire, and then asked him to explain his presence in England. He told me that his uncle had died suddenly, leaving no will, and that the lawyers had telegraphed the news to him. He had at once thrown up his position and started for England by the next steamer. Arriving in London too late to see his lawyers that day, and having after his long absence no other friends there, he had come, as he expressed it, to see whether I had forgotten my old fag.

“And right glad I am that you did, my boy,” said I; “where is your luggage? We must send to the hotel for it, for I shall make you up a bed here for to-night.”

He made a feeble protest, which I at once overruled; a messenger was found and despatched to the hotel, and we settled down for a talk about old times which lasted far into the night. The next morning he went betimes to call upon his lawyers, and in the afternoon started for Fernleigh Hall (now his property), but not before we had decided that I should run down and spend Christmas there with him instead of accepting any of my three previous invitations.

“I expect to find everything in a terrible state,” he said; “but in a week’s time I shall be able to get things a little to rights, and if you will turn up on the twenty-third I will promise you at least a bed to sleep in, and you will be doing a most charitable action in preventing my first Christmas in England for many a year from being a lonely one.”

So we settled it, and consequently at four o’clock on the afternoon of the twenty-third I was shaking hands again with Jack on the platform of the little country station a few miles from Fernleigh. The short day had already drawn to a close by the time we reached the house, so I could get only a general idea of its outside appearance. It was a large Elizabethan mansion, but evidently not in very good repair; however, the rooms into which we were ushered were bright and cheerful enough. We had a snug little dinner, and after it Jack proposed to show me over the house. Accordingly, preceded by a solemn old butler with a lamp, we wandered through interminable mazes of rambling passages, across great desolated halls, and in and out of dozens of tapestried and panelled bedrooms—some of them with walls of enormous thickness, suggestive of all sorts of trap-doors and secret outlets—till my brain became absolutely confused, and I felt as though, if my companions had abandoned me, I might have spent days in trying to find my way out of the labyrinth.

“You could accommodate an army here, Jack!” said I.

“Yes,” he replied, “and in the good old days Fernleigh was known all over the county for its open hospitality; but now, as you see, the rooms are bare and almost unfurnished.”

“You’ll soon change all that when you bring home a nice little wife,” I said; “the place only wants a lady to take care of it.”

“No hope of it, my dear fellow, I’m sorry to say,” replied Jack; “there is not enough money for that.”

I knew how in our school-days he had worshipped with all a boy’s devotion lovely Lilian Featherstone, the daughter of the rector of the parish, and I had heard from him at college that on his part at least their childish intimacy had ripened into something deeper; so I asked after her now, and soon discovered that his sojourn in the tropics had worked no change in his feelings in this respect, that he had already contrived to meet her and her father out riding since his return, and that he had good reason to hope from her blush of pleasure on seeing him that he had not been forgotten in his absence. But alas! her father had only his living to depend on, and Jack’s uncle (a selfish profligate) had not only let everything go to ruin, but had also so encumbered the estate that, by the time all was paid off and it was entirely free, there was but little money left—barely sufficient to support Jack himself, and certainly not enough to marry upon.

“So there is no hope of Lilian yet, you see,” he concluded; “but I am young and strong; I can work, and I think she will wait for me. You shall see her on Thursday, for I have promised that we will dine with them then; they would have insisted on having me on Christmas day, but that I told them I had an old school-fellow coming down.”

Just then we reached the door of the picture-gallery, and the old butler, having thrown it open, was proceeding to usher us in, but I said:

“No, Jack, let us leave this until tomorrow; we cannot see pictures well by this light. Let us go back to the fire, and you shall tell me that old legend of your family that was so much talked about at college; I never heard more than the merest fragments of it.”

“There is nothing worth calling a legend,” said Jack, as we settled down in the cosy little room he called his study; “nor is it very old, for it refers only to the latter part of the eighteenth century. The interest of the story, such as it is, centres round Sir Ralph Fernleigh, the last baronet, who seems by all accounts to have been a somewhat questionable character. He is said to have been a strange, reserved man—a man of strong passions, iron will, and indomitable pride; he spent much of his time abroad, and was reported to have acquired enormous wealth by means that would not bear too close examination. He was commonly known as ‘wicked Sir Ralph,’ and the more superstitious of his neighbours firmly believed that he had studied the black art during his long absences in the East. Others hinted that he was owner of a privateer, and that in those troubled times it was easy for a reckless man to commit acts of piracy with impunity.

“He was credited with a great knowledge of jewels, and was reported to possess one of the most splendid private collections of them in the world; but as none were found by his successor, I conclude that unless they were stolen the story was a myth, like that which represented him as having bars of gold and silver stacked up in his cellars. It seems certain that he was really tolerably rich, and that during his later years, which he spent here, he lived a remarkably retired life. He discharged all servants but a confidential man of his own, an Italian who had accompanied him in his wanderings; and these two lived a sort of hermit-life here all by themselves, holding no intercourse with the outer world. The universal report was that, though he had stored up great hoards of ill-gotten wealth, Sir Ralph lived like a miser. The few people who had seen him whispered darkly of a haunted look always to be seen on his proud face, and talked beneath their breath of some terrible secret crime; but I do not know that anything was ever really proved against him.

“One morning, however, he mysteriously disappeared; at least such was the story of the Italian servant, who came one day to the village asking in a frightened way in his broken English whether any one had seen his master. He said that, two days before, Sir Ralph had in the evening ordered his horse to be saddled early on the following morning, as he was going on a short journey alone; but when the morning came, though the horse was ready, *he* was not. He did not answer to his servant’s calls, and though the latter searched through every room in the great old house, not a trace of his master could he find. His bed, he said, had not been slept in that night, and the only theory he could offer was that he had been carried away by the demons he used to raise. The villagers suspected foul play, and there was a talk of arresting the servant—which, coming to the latter’s ears, seems to have alarmed him so much (in his ignorance of the customs of the country) that *he* also mysteriously disappeared that night, and was never seen again.

“Two days afterwards an exploring party was formed by the more adventurous of the villagers. They went all over the house and grounds, examined every nook and corner, and shouted themselves hoarse; ‘but there was no voice, neither any that answered,’ and from that day to this no sign either of master or man has ever revisited the light of the sun. Since the explorers could

find none of the rumoured hoards of money either, it was an accepted article of faith among them that 'that there furriner' had murdered his master, hidden his body, and carried off the treasure, and of course a story presently arose that Sir Ralph's ghost had been seen about the place.

"They whispered that his room might be known from all the rest in this dark old house by a peculiar atmosphere of its own, caused by the constant haunting of the unquiet spirit of the owner; but this soon became a mere tradition, and now no one knows even in what part of the house his room was, nor have I ever heard of the ghost's appearance in my uncle's time, though I know be half-believed in it and never liked to speak of it. After Sir Ralph's disappearance the place was unoccupied and neglected for some years, till at last a distant cousin put in a claim to it, got it allowed by the lawyers, and took possession. He found, it is said, but a small balance after all to Sir Ralph's credit at his bankers'; but he had money of his own, apparently, for he proceeded to refit and rearrange the old place, and soon had it in respectable order. From him it descended to my uncle, who has let every thing run to seed again, as you see."

"That is a very interesting family legend after all, Jack," said I, "though perhaps rather lacking in romantic completeness. But have you no relics of this mysterious Sir Ralph?"

"There is his portrait in the picture-gallery along with the rest; there are some queer old books of his in the library, and one or two articles of furniture that are reported to have been his; but there is nothing to add to the romance of the story, I am afraid."

Little he thought, as he uttered those words just as we were separating for the night, what the real romance of that story was, or how soon we were to discover it!

My bedroom was a huge panelled chamber with walls of prodigious thickness, and with some very beautiful old carving about it. A border of roses and lilies that ran round the panels especially attracted my attention as one of the finest examples of that style of work that I had ever seen. There is always, I think, something uncanny about great Elizabethan bedrooms and huge four-post bedsteads, and I suppose my late ghostly experience had rendered me specially alive to such influences; so, though the roaring fire which Jack's hospitable care had provided for me threw a cheery light into every corner, I found myself thinking as I lay down in bed:

"What if this should turn out to be Sir Ralph's forgotten chamber, and he should come and disturb my rest, as that other visitor came to me in town!"

This idea returned to me again and again, until I really began to fancy that I could distinguish the peculiar atmosphere of which Jack had spoken—a sort of subtle influence that was gradually taking possession of me. This I felt would never do, if I was to have a comfortable night, so I roused myself from this unhealthy train of thought and resolutely put it away from me; but do what I would, I could not entirely shake off ghostly associations, for (recalled I suppose by my surroundings) every detail of the strange occurrence at my chambers passed before my mind over and over again with startling distinctness and fidelity.

Eventually I fell into a troubled sleep, in which my late mysterious visitor and the idea I had formed of Sir Ralph Fernleigh seemed to chase each other through my brain, till at last all these confused visions culminated in one peculiarly vivid dream. I seemed to myself to be lying in bed (just as I really was), with the fire burnt down to a deep red glow, when suddenly there appeared before me the same figure that I had seen in my chambers, habited in the same loose black robe; but now it held in its left hand a small book—evidently that to which the slip in my possession had belonged, for I could see the very place from which the missing leaf had been torn—and with the forefinger of the right hand the spectre was pointing to the last page of the book, while it looked eagerly in my face. I sprang up and approached the figure; it retreated before me until it reached one of the panelled walls, through which it seemed to vanish, still pointing to the page of

its book, and with that imploring gaze still on its face. I woke with a start, and found myself standing close to the wall at the spot where the figure had seemed to disappear, with the dull red glow of the fire reflected from the carving, just as I had seen it in my dream, and my nostrils filled once more with that strange sweet Oriental perfume! Then in a moment a revelation dawned upon my mind. There *was* a peculiarity in the atmosphere of the room—I had been quite right in fancying so; and that peculiarity, which I could not recognise before, consisted in the faintest possible permanent suggestion of that magical odour so faint that I had not been able to identify it until this stronger rush of the scent made it clear.

Was it a dream, I asked myself; or had I really seen my mysterious visitor once more? I could not tell, but at any rate the smell in the room was an undoubted fact. I went and tried the door, but, as I expected, found it as I left it—fast locked. I stirred up my fire into a bright blaze, threw fresh coals on it, and went to bed again—this time to sleep soundly and refreshingly till I was awakened in the morning by the servant bringing hot water.

Reviewing my last night's adventure in the sober light of day, I was disposed to think that something of it at least might be due to overheated imagination, though I still fancied I could detect that faint peculiarity of atmosphere. I decided to say nothing to Fernleigh, since to speak of it would involve describing the apparition in my chambers, which I shrank from discussing with any one; so when Jack asked me how I had slept, I replied:

“Very well indeed towards morning, though a little restless in the earlier part of the night.”

After breakfast we walked about the park, which was very extensive, and studied the stately old house from different points of view. I was much struck with the great beauty of its situation and surroundings; and, though there were sad traces of neglect everywhere, I saw that the expenditure of what was comparatively but a small amount of money for so large a place would make it fully worthy to rank with any mansion and estate of its size in the kingdom. I enthusiastically pointed out the various possibilities to Jack, but he, poor fellow, sorrowfully remarked that the sum required to make the improvements, though no doubt comparatively small, was absolutely pretty large, and far beyond his present means.

After some hour's ramble we returned to the house, and Jack proposed that we should look over the picture-gallery and some other rooms that we had not seen on the previous night. We took the gallery first, and Jack told me that it had once contained many almost priceless gems of the old Flemish and Italian masters; but his dissolute uncle had sold most of them, often at merely nominal prices, to raise money for his riotous life in town, so that what were left were, generally speaking, comparatively valueless. There was the usual collection of ancestral portraits—some life-like and carefully executed, others mere daubs; and we were passing them over with scant interest, when my eye was caught by one which instantly riveted my attention and sent a cold thrill down my spine, bright midday though it was; for there, out of the canvas, looked the very face I had seen so vividly in my dream last night—the face of the mysterious visitant at my chambers in London!

The commanding look of iron will and dauntless courage was there, and the same indefinable air of latent passion and cruelty; there too, though tenderly treated by the artist and made less prominent than it was in reality, was the curious white scar running down from the lower lip. Except that he was here dressed in rich court costume instead of the plain black robe, nothing but the pleading look of appeal was wanting to make the resemblance exact. I suppose something of the emotion I felt showed itself in my face, for Jack seized me by the arm, crying:

“Bless me, Tom, what is the matter? Are you ill? Why are you glaring at the portrait of Sir Ralph in that awful manner?”

“Sir Ralph? Yes, the wicked Sir Ralph. I know him. He came into my room last night. I’ve seen him twice.”

Muttering these disjointed sentences, I staggered to an ottoman and tried to collect my scattered senses. For the whole truth had flashed upon me, and it was almost too much for me. Of course it has occurred to the intelligent reader long ago, but until this moment absolutely no suspicion had ever crossed my mind that Sir Ralph and my spectral visitor in London were identical; now I saw it all. The word commencing with ‘Ra’ that he had tried so hard to write was his own name; he had somehow (heaven alone knows how) foreseen that I should visit Fernleigh, and so had tried to make an impression on my mind—introduce himself to me, as it were—beforehand. I was now obliged to tell Jack the whole story, and was relieved to find that instead of laughing at me, as I more than half expected, he was deeply interested.

“I never believed in a ghost before,” he said, “but here there seems no room for doubt. A perfect stranger shows himself to you in London, you recognise his portrait at once on sight down here at Fernleigh, and he turns out to be the very man whom tradition points out as haunting this place! The chain of evidence is perfect.”

“But why should he have come to *me*?” I said. “I know nothing about ghosts and their ways; I am not even what these spiritualists call mediumistic. Would it not have been much more straightforward to appeal to you direct? Why should *I* be singled out for such a visitation?”

“Impossible to say,” replied Jack; “I suppose he liked your looks; but what could he have wanted? We are no nearer discovering that than we were before. Where is that scrap of paper? For it strikes me that the solution of its mystery will yield the answer to our riddle.”

I pulled out my pocket-book and handed the slip to Jack.

“Ha!” he exclaimed, the moment he glanced at it, “this is certainly Sir Ralph’s monogram; I know it well, for I have seen it in several of the books in the library.”

We at once adjourned to the library and compared the writing in some of Sir Ralph’s books with that on the slip; the resemblance was perfect, though the writing on the slip seemed more carefully done, as though with a special effort to make every letter legible: while in the monogram (a very complicated one) every line and stroke were exactly similar. With Jack’s guidance I was able to make out of it the initials ‘R.F.’, but I should certainly never have discovered them without assistance. We now concentrated our attention on the two lines of writing.

Jack took a powerful glass from a drawer and scrutinised them long and carefully.

“Your reading of the letters seems quite correct,” he said at length; “but what language can this possibly be? It is not Spanish, Portuguese, nor Italian, I know; and you, who are acquainted with several Oriental dialects, do not recognise it either. I don’t believe it is a language at all, Tom; it looks much more like a cryptograph.”

“Scarcely, I think,” I remarked; “you know, in a cryptograph one always gets utterly impossible combinations of consonants which betray its nature at once.”

“Not invariably,” replied Jack; “that depends upon the system on which it is constructed. I happen, though only by way of pastime, to have made this subject a rather special study, and I do not think there are many cryptographs which I could not, with sufficient time and patience, manage to make out.”

“Then, Jack, if you think this may be one, by all means proceed to exercise your talents upon it at once.”

Jack set to work, and I must say I was really amazed at the ingenuity he displayed, and the facility with which he seized upon and followed up the most seemingly insignificant clues. I

need give no particulars of his processes; thanks to Edgar Allen Poe, everybody in these days knows how a cryptograph is solved. Suffice it to say that this, though really extremely simple, gave a good deal of trouble and led us off on a false scent, in consequence of the fact that a double system is employed in its construction. The rule is to substitute for every consonant the letter succeeding it in the alphabet, but for every vowel—not the letter, but—the *vowel* next *preceding* it in the alphabet. By a reversal of this process the reader will easily discover that its signification is as follows:

Pull the centre rose in the third panel.

Our excitement may be imagined when this was deciphered. I knew at once to what it referred, for I remembered the carved border of roses and lilies round the panels in my bedroom of last night. The butler came in to announce luncheon, but we cared little for that; we rushed upstairs like a couple of school-boys and dashed into the panelled room.

“The third panel from which end?” asked Jack.

But I had not the slightest doubt; I remembered that the spectre had vanished through the wall on the left of the fireplace, so I walked up to that spot without hesitation, put my hand on the third panel from the corner, and said:

“This is it.”

So large was the panel, however, that the centre rose was above our reach, and it was necessary to drag a table underneath it to stand upon. Jack sprang upon it and gave an energetic pull at the centre rose, but no result followed.

“Get down again,” I said; “let us try the other side of the panel.”

We moved the table, and Jack tried again, and this time with success. A small piece of the border had been cut out and hinged at the top, and the pull upon the rose lifted this and disclosed a cavity about six inches each way, in which was a large knob—evidently a handle. For some time this resisted our efforts, the machinery attached being probably rusty; but eventually we succeeded in turning it, and the whole huge panel swung into the room like a door, showing behind it a dark arched recess with steps leading downward, up which came, stronger than ever, that strange sweet smell of the perfume of Egypt which had haunted my thoughts so long. Jack was springing in, but I held him back.

“Stay, my dear fellow,” I said; “curb your impatience. That place probably has not been opened for a very long time, and you must first let the fresh air penetrate it; you don’t know what noxious gases may have accumulated down in that dreadful hole. Besides, we must first lock the door of the bedroom, that we may not be interrupted in our investigation.”

Finally I persuaded him to wait five minutes, though in our excited condition it was a hard thing to do. Meantime we could not but admire the enormous strength of the walls, and the care that had been taken to make the moving panel safe by a massive backing of oak that prevented it from giving anything like a hollow sound if accidentally struck, and indeed made it as capable of resisting any conceivable blow as any other portion of the wall. When we noticed, too, the immense size and strength of the lock it had to move, we no longer wondered at the trouble it had cost us to turn the handle.

When the five minutes had expired we lighted a couple of candles that stood on the mantel-piece, and with mingled feelings of awe and pleasure entered the secret passage. The stairs turned abruptly to the left, and descended in the thickness of the wall. My fears as to want of

ventilation seemed groundless, for there was quite a strong draught, proving that there must be an opening of some kind in the passage.

At the bottom of the steps we found ourselves in a long narrow vault or chamber, scarcely six feet in width, but perhaps thirty in length, and certainly fourteen or fifteen in height. Floor and walls were alike stone, and at the extreme end near the roof, quite out of reach, was a small slit such as those made of old for the convenience of archers, through which came a certain amount of light, and the current of air that we had noticed. On the floor at the further end were two large chests—the only furniture of this dungeon—and on one of them lay a black heap that by the flickering light of our candles looked horribly like a shrouded corpse.

“What can that be?” said I, shrinking back instinctively; but Jack pushed on to the end of the vault, and then dropped his candle with a smothered cry and came back towards me with a very white face.

“It is a dead body,” he said in a horror-stricken whisper; “it must be Sir Ralph.”

“Then,” said I in the same tone, “he must have been shut in here somehow and starved to death.”

“Good heavens!” cried Jack; and he rushed past me and up the stairs at full speed. At first I thought he had lost his nerve and deserted me, but in a few moments he was back again, though still pale with emotion.

“Just think, Tom,” he said; “suppose a gust of wind had shut that door, the very same thing might have happened to us! No one knows of the existence of this place, so they would never think of looking here for us; and with such a massive door as that, it would be hopeless to dream of forcing our way out or making ourselves heard. Now I have fixed it open, and we are safe.”

“Horrible as it is, I suppose we must examine this thing,” I said.

We approached it, Jack picking up and relighting his candle. The sight that met our eyes was truly an awful one, for there, stretched on the top of one of the chests, and wrapped in a loose black robe with wide sleeves, lay a skeleton, with its grinning face turned upwards and its arm thrown carelessly over the side as if in ghastly imitation of sleep. Beside it on the floor lay a curiously shaped wide-mouthed bottle, and on the other chest—and I shuddered afresh as I recognised it—the very memorandum-book that the spectre had carried in my dream! I took it up, and we at once proceeded to examine it. It opened at the place where a leaf had been newly torn out, but I turned hastily to those last pages at which the figure had pointed so earnestly, and there read the following words:

I, Ralph Fernleigh, Bart., do here indite these my last dying words. By the judgment of God or by some foul treachery I am fast shut up in this mine own secret place, from which is no escape. Here I have lain three days and three nights, and forasmuch as I see naught before me but to die by hunger I am now resolved to put an end to this my so miserable existence by eating of those poisonous gums, whereof I have happily some store. But first will I confess the deadly sin that lieth upon my soul, and will lay solemn charge upon him who shall here find my body and shall read this my writing.²

* * *

And if he who reads these my words shall fail to make such restitution as I have charged upon him, or shall reveal ever to mortal man this my deadly sin that I have here confessed, then shall my solemn curse rest upon him for ever, and my spirit shall dog him even to his grave. But if he

² The document itself explains why my friend was compelled to omit some part of it.—C. W. L.

shall do faithfully this my behest, then do I hereby freely give and bequeath to him such wealth as he will here find, hoping that he may use it to better purpose than I have done. And so may God have mercy on my soul.

RALPH FERNLEIGH.

* * *

How deeply we were affected by thus, in the very presence of his mortal remains, reading this strange message from the dead, may easily be imagined. Jack had picked up the wide-mouthed bottle, at the bottom of which still remained some dark-coloured resinous matter—evidently the ‘poisonous gums’ of the writing; but on hearing of its terrible association he dashed it on the floor in horror, and it was broken into a thousand pieces. Nor could I censure him for the act, though I knew that it contained the perfume of Egypt that I had so long desired. (I may here mention that I afterwards recovered a few grains and subjected it to analysis; it proved to be the 7 Persian *lôbhán*, but mixed with belladonna, Indian hemp, and some other vegetable ingredients whose exact nature I was unable to determine.)

Our next duty was the examination of the chests; but to perform this it was necessary first to remove the skeleton, and that we shrank from touching or even looking at. Still it had to be done, so we fetched a sheet from the bedroom, laid the ghastly relic reverently upon that, and so lifted it from the bed where it had lain so long. Then, not without a feeling of excitement, we opened the chests—a work of no difficulty, for the key that was in the lock of one fitted that of the other as well. The first was closely packed with bags and smaller boxes, the former of which, to our astonishment, we found to contain chiefly gold and silver coin of various countries; while the latter proved the truth of at least one of the popular rumours about Sir Ralph, for arranged carefully in them was a collection of gems, cut and uncut, some of which even our inexperienced eyes could tell to be almost priceless.

“Jack, my boy,” said I grasping his hand (for not even the presence of the skeleton could altogether restrain my joy), “you shall soon wed your Lilian now! Even after carrying out Sir Ralph’s wishes you will still be a rich man.”

“Yes, Tom,” answered he; “but remember, half of this is yours; without you I should never have known of its existence.”

“No, no,” replied I; “not a penny will I touch; I have enough and to spare, and besides it is all yours by right, for you are Sir Ralph’s heir.”

But he insisted, and at last to pacify him I had to consent to accept one or two of the larger jewels as mementos. The other chest contained a great quantity of family plate, some of it very rich and massive, and half a dozen small bars of gold, probably the basis of the wild myth that I mentioned before.

By the time our investigations were finished evening had come on; and, as may be supposed, we sat down to dinner with an appetite, and after it was over sat talking and planning far into the night. Very happily, though very quietly, we spent our Christmas day, and on the Thursday we dined at the rectory as arranged. Certainly Jack had not exaggerated the charms of his fair Lilian, and when in the course of the evening I saw them come out of the conservatory together, both looking greatly discomposed but deliciously happy, I knew that I might safely offer the dear fellow my congratulations.

I have little more to tell. The dying charge of Sir Ralph was scrupulously obeyed. Jack and I paid a visit to a somewhat out-of-the-way part of the Continent, and spent some time in

searching through old records and unravelling forgotten genealogies; but after much toil we met with gratifying success, and at long last atonement was made—so far as in such cases atonement ever can be made—for the sin of the previous century, and the traditional hatred which certain families bore to the memory of a magic-working English lord was changed into a vivid and surprised gratitude. All was done that could be done; indeed, Jack was most lavishly generous, and we have every reason to hope that Sir Ralph was satisfied. At any rate, he has never since shown himself, either to praise or to blame us; so we trust that his long-tormented soul is at peace.

Three months later, in the sweet early spring-time, I went down to Fernleigh again to act as 'best man' at a wedding, and as we passed down the churchyard the happy bridegroom silently pointed out to me a white marble cross bearing simply the words:

SIR RALPH FERNLEIGH, BART.

1795.

* * *

Though not myself an eye-witness of the events of this story, I received them on unimpeachable testimony; in fact I may say that I had evidence for them such as would have satisfied any ordinary jury. With the narrator I had the pleasure of an intimate acquaintance of some years' duration. His friend Mr. Fernleigh I have seen only once, when he was in town for a few days; but on that occasion he fully and circumstantially corroborated Mr. Keston's account of these strange events, and gave me a warm and hearty invitation to come down and spend a fortnight at the Hall, so as to examine the theatre of their occurrence at my leisure; and further, as my engagements compelled me regretfully to forego the pleasure of this interesting visit, he was good enough to take the trouble to send up to Mr. Keston (for my inspection) the curious old memorandum-book and the torn leaf containing the cryptograph which occupies so prominent a place in the narrative.

Whether or not my friend is right in describing himself as not mediumistic in the ordinary sense of the word is uncertain. There are certain peculiarities in his character which may help to explain what seems to have puzzled him so much—the reason why Sir Ralph should have selected *him* to receive his communication. He is preeminently a man of deep feeling, of intense and ready sympathy, as indeed may be seen from the narrative; a man who reminds one of those lines of Béranger:

Son cœnr est un luth suspendu;
Sitot qu'on le touche il resonance.

Probably this capability of sympathy attracted Sir Ralph as a channel through which his purpose could be carried out.

The story seems to me to differ from other accounts of the visitations of 'earthbound sods' only (1) in the appearance of the wraith in the first place at a distance from the scene of death and to a person in no way specially connected with it, and (2) in the foreknowledge which the dead man seems to have possessed of that person's visit to his former home—not only before the invitation was given, but even before the *idea* of the invitation (which, as far as we can see, was quite accidental) could possibly have existed in the mind of either host or guest. This latter is the point

which seems to me most difficult to explain, since such foreknowledge would appear to indicate a power of prevision much more considerable than that with which men in such a condition can usually be credited. It is probable that Sir Ralph's attention was attracted to Mr. Keston in consequence of the bond of friendship existing between him and Mr. John Fernleigh, and that, finding him to be sufficiently impressionable to receive his communication, he endeavoured to deliver his message to him in his chambers; but, failing in that attempt, he influenced Mr. Fernleigh (as he might easily do) to invite him into his own peculiar domain, where his power was naturally greater. The fact that the strange, rare and magical perfume of Egypt was known to both men must be regarded simply as a coincidence, though a dramatic one.