

The Last Mission

CHAPTER XXIV

REDEMPTION!

For some time a feeling of wretchedness that baffles me to describe had been gaining on me. I no longer cared for my work, nor was my being filled with joy when I had to attend upon the throne of Diaphernes. I submitted to enter his presence because I had no power to do otherwise; because I recognised that the leading of Fate was inevitable. Yet had I reflected candidly on my own loyalty, I must have confessed that I was rapidly losing it.

Ever since a certain night on the platform of the Oregon ranch, I had been conscious of a subtle change in myself; not unlike the feeling men have when the air is charged with electricity, of intense weariness, together with an indefinable dread of something yet to come. It was in vain I struggled against it, and strove to fill my thoughts with the image of Diaphernes. It would not be shaken off. The personal beauty of my royal master exercised little of its former magnetism, nor could it countercheck the advance of these new emotions.

Much as I hated the incessant trampling up and down the Avenue of Gloom, and the company of those I found there, I now preferred to linger there rather than bow before the throne of the monarch. Lonely, restless, peevish as I was, I had no hankering after the crypt with its hidden, unknown pit.

Thoughts that had been common to me in my mortal days were gradually recurring—memories of higher aspirations, of the shame of evil, of a hope some day to do a little better. I had a craving for something my present life could never give—something—was it possible? apart from vice; even something nearer to my opponent Sagatheela. For a time I seemed to be composed of two elements, good and evil; to be acted upon by two equal Opposing forces, to be drawn by two pairs of contending hands; and I, lying passive the while—I was trying to recollect something that ever and ever eluded me.

It was a face. At times I had its picture almost complete in my mind; only the eyes were wanting, or the forehead, or the expression of the mouth, or even some smaller but equally essential detail.

It would hover near me, and then, just before I had grasped the whole, a mist would pass between and blot it out from my vision. So memory ever played me false, flattering me with the near accomplishment of my desires, placing before me the materials for the construction of my fancy, then snatching them away and dashing the whole to pieces. After a while, I would patiently concentrate my faculties in the direction of reconstruction, gather together the scattered fabrics, arrange, prepare, build up one by one, almost to the point of perfection: and again the will-o'-the-wisp would slide from my grasp and leave me groping in the darkness.

How I bewailed my lot as I plodded on, wishing for what I had once refused, valuing what I had voluntarily cast away. It has always been the same, since Diaphernes himself looked across the boundary of Eden! That which cannot be regained seems most precious; and the soul must have leaven, for too much wickedness nauseates in the end the same as sodden bread does.

After all, the joys that man wins for the lusts of the flesh, money-grubbing, immorality, intemperance, the setting up of false images, success in earthly things, are merely imaginary. Beauty wastes, suspicion is engendered, every man's hand is against his neighbour; and the things that were his gladness become the very roots of bitterness. Such is earthly joy, the joy

whose ends Diaphernes commanded me to promote. I was learning the falseness of the position, yet feared the wrath of the stronger, and dared not rebel.

Then—that eternal darkness! I pined for a ray of light, for the sun, the air, and the sky. The giant trees in their grotesque contortions were more hateful to me than ever. The antics of the living branches, tearing and mutilating, ceased to possess even the fascination they had once exercised over me. And that crowd of souls, all melancholy, all evil! Toiling along in mournful files, they passed me, always seeking to discern what they were never to discover.

Now and again I watched them with some interest: the sight of some red spirit made me wonder if my own colour had changed, and if such a transformation would account for the undoubted change within myself. But, if this were so, why were my inclinations leading away from, rather than towards, Diaphernes' work? Would it not be more consistent that I should revile all approach to virtue with more warmth than ever? This, then, could hardly be the cause. I must look elsewhere outside. Some power that not even the precincts of Monelpisia were strong enough to bar out, was influencing me here, sowing the seeds of dissension in my breast, poisoning my mind against my princely master!

Ah! a breath of my old love for him wafted back to me at the thought! Weakling, coward, traitor, that I was to harbour such wavering fancies! Was I no longer a soldier of Diaphernes? Shame on me for a craven peace-seeker! What ho! for war—war—war! War against the Christian life, against virtue, for Diaphernes! Let me be in the foremost ranks, leading, seeking, finding, winning! War! Diaphernes!

Ah! a spirit passing pauses to contemplate me. Has he heard that cry? Can I have betrayed my thoughts by self-communing? He moves on, with slower steps than before, and is lost in the shadowy crowd. Then came the turn of the tide.

The half-seen face looms again on the horizon of my imaginings, as a white cloud in the crimson of sunset, assuming shape, yet absorbing, and melting away in the glare ere its completion. But the image is always there—and it ever speaks.

“Virtue is the honour,” it says, “without which no soldier can be noble.”

Virtue! Who spoke of that here?

“Seek it,” continues the persistent voice.

“Where?” I ask. “Not in earth, where a fragment of shattered humanity alone struggles to hold it: not here, where the spirits have killed it: assuredly not in the inner crypt of Diaphernes!”

“Not with Diaphernes, whom thou no longer lovest, but in the heaven of God,” was the answer. “In the love of Christ. Seek virtue—that is, seek Him—and thou shalt find joy also. Not earthly passing joy, but the great, the glorious, the noble, the eternal. And reflect, has evil ever stamped out virtue? Has the master whom thou servest turned away from Christ one heart that had the will to be faithful? Remember Noah, Moses, Joshua. Think—if thou darest—of the Name, of the Love of Jesus.”

The voice grew sterner. “Thou hast long served this king of Monelpisia, and for what? A smile, a nod of the head, a word of praise? Any worthless woman can give more than this: and thou despisest women. Thou hast fought his battles: for what? To see the kindly light of favour in his eyes. Such is the reward a man receives from a woman. So thou hast incurred God's wrath, drawn nearer to the bottomless pit. And why? Awake, O Agonistes, before it be too late.”

This and many other things did the strange voice say, so many that the chronicle of my life could not contain them all—for the voice was with me always in the depths of the gloom.

As I walked thus, a prey to conflicting thoughts, I suddenly felt a hot hand on my shoulder, and turning, encountered the stern, cold face of my first guide, Aginarius.

There was a malicious gleam in his eyes and a cruel snarl about his lips. His greeting was characteristic.

“Agonostes, dog of an accursed fiend, bestir thyself: the royal master hath need of thee forthwith. Methinks the honour does not please thee as it should.”

His eyes were upon me and we faced each other in a silence that meant much. At last he averted his glance, caught my hand with such force that his nails sank into my nerveless palm, and in tones that quivered with rage bade me follow.

But the rebellious mood was upon me, and I, resenting his discourtesy, thrust him back.

His astonishment pleased me, and I laughed till the greater avenue echoed with the unwonted sound. He had been unprepared for the attack, and had shot into swift collision with another spectre, so that the two lean forms crashed down together.

There were not wanting those who rejoice at the sufferings of others and who do not scorn to strike the fallen. I was fain to interfere to save my late opponent from the gibbering, jeering crowd that instantly gathered. Strange to relate, they were inclined to respect and obey me.

“Thou shalt pay for this, thou son of a dust-begotten man! thou thrice accursed spawn from the earth beneath—thou—thou—” his voice rose to a shriek of rage—“a plague of cancers upon thee! a murrain to devour thee!”

I know not how much longer he would have continued in this strain. It was I who reminded him of his mission. Then he saw fit to desist, and rising, led the way, but this time without touching me. As we departed, a faint murmur of gratification from the watching spirits told me that popular feeling had been on my side. In Monelpisia, as on earth, resistance against oppression, though not always practically aided, generally wins a certain meed of admiration. So, somewhat appeased for the discomfort I had endured, I followed my sinister guide in silence. Down the dark avenue we trod, a gloomy, fearsome pair of souls indeed, in a land devoid of light and air, yet rent by gusts of cold, sobbing wind, blown from the nostrils of great, bat-like creatures that flew overhead till the leaves shook and rustled as in a temper. Green shades peered at us from behind the forked branches of the wrestling trees, jabbering and jeering.

All were not confined to nooks and crannies; some followed us in a kind of sad procession, creeping on misshapen legs, clawing the air with pincer-like hands, always ready to turn and seize and rend each other. I saw one monster steal from behind a giant tree and fling itself upon a weaker form, dragging it fiercely to its baneful bosom.

Pity—that strange new impulse within me—bade me stay and succour the entreating victim, but Aginarius turned and sharply rebuked me for the meditated delay. So with furious haste we passed on and left them, thrusting aside such as fain would hinder, and these were many. We pressed onwards and defied them all, and at last came to the great gates of the crypt of Diaphernes.

Unwillingly enough, I entered, full of I knew not what forebodings. But the pit was closed, and only a tank of golden writhing serpents met my eyes instead.

Moving wearily across the floor I halted before the throne of Diaphernes, standing like a lofty rock in some great wilderness. It was bathed in glowing colours and fantastically adorned with moving designs that often made me think the throne itself was full of life. And in truth I still believe it was.

While I was trying to assort in my own mind the strange confusion of figures that rendered me giddy, a voice, the incarnation of sweet pathos, awoke the thousand echoes and made me lift my head. Diaphernes, in all the majesty of his beauty, was looking straight down upon me.

A certain indefinable sadness seemed to pervade the eyes which held me spell-bound. They were so large, so deep, so full of meaning. They read me through and through, I knew; and when he spoke, it seemed to be hardly his lips or the melody of his voice that conveyed his meaning, but the eyes. I had to listen.

“I have summoned thee, O Agonostes,” he said; “to put thy loyalty to the test. Again, beware of Sagatheela. She is not far from thee, but even in these precincts would lure and entrap thee. Avoid her; bid her begone. She is my enemy and therefore thine. Still one little chance remains to her of winning thee from me. That small chance depends on thy loyalty to me—and methinks thou art loyal.”

How could I lie in the face of those penetrating eyes? Yet, while they held me, it was not a lie to say I loved him. Seeing that delay only bred mistrust, I found voice to answer:

“What can be greater than my love for thee, O noblest prince?”

A peculiar smile played over the strong face.

“Art thou so sure of thy great love?” he asked.

“As sure as I am that I stand before thee, that the birds of the air fly, that the billows of the ocean break, that human life does not terminate with mortal breath, so sure am I of my love, O prince.”

“Thou speakest well, my servant. Yet Methought—’twas but an idle fancy—thy countenance would deny what thy speech affirmed. Art thou still so sure? Answer, and be zealous. A lover does not fear in the presence of the beloved.”

As he softly spoke the words, he leaned forward as if to fascinate me with his gaze. Never did he look to me more like some splendid predatory bird with glistening plumage, holding its quarry in eerie admiration. I stood before him and could not remove my eyes.

There was not a sound in the great hall; the walls were as still as death, and nothing disturbed the vast silence. I felt as if many hidden eyes were bent on me, many invisible ears strained to catch my answer. The lights within the skulls burnt blue, torches stooped, row by row, in my direction, casting their flames behind them like trailing robes. I longed to look round, to see and defy the watching things, but the spirit who was their ruler held me bound, gazing into his eyes. Yet when speech came to me I waxed eloquent.

“How can I tell thee of my love, O puissant Diaphernes?” I said, “if my deeds on the earth may not speak for me. Have I not fought thy battles and overcome thy adversaries? Or have my puny efforts passed unnoticed, my prayers gone unheard? Compared with thee I am an atom, a nothingness, without power, understanding, beauty or grace. Yet when did I give ear to other counsel but thine, cry to any but thee? Have I not rejoiced in thy presence, lived in and for thy love? Am I not loyal? If thou still doubtest me, believe it is my words rather than my heart that fail. Since my mortal youth, I have been but a poor stammerer, tied of tongue. So forgive, O monarch, these poor words, so feebly representing all that my soul would say.”

I paused, and stood in an attitude of supplication, my eyes upturned to him, and my being filled with a tumult of sorrow. By slow degrees the mists which had gathered over my thoughts were clearing away, and my old love reasserting itself with tenfold force. I revelled in his godlike beauty, and bowed myself in adoration. The lights around the hall burned with dazzling brilliancy, the skulls rattled, the walls murmured, and everywhere I heard sighs as of a vast relief. My speech had pleased Diaphernes. He spoke:

“Thy words are not without weight, O loyal Agonostes: neither have they failed to find favour in my ears. Thou speakest as one who should be faithful, and I will take thee at thy word. But indeed thou needest never plead the lack of eloquence, for words speed from thy tongue as rain

falls from the sky, or arrows fly from a host of archers. Learn then, for thy comfort, that I trust thee and thy vows, nay, more than this, I love thee. Never look abashed: for of all the spirits who inhabit Monelpisia, thou hast the least to fear from me, the most to gain.”

“Since thou, O my king,” I replied, “dost love the meanest of thy subjects, and dost tell him so as a recompense for his struggles, thou art indeed a monarch without equal, and worthy of all love and praise. Fain would I thank thee with my life, but that we immortals lack the power of dying, therefore I can only beseech thee to accept for ever the poor service of my soul.”

A gentle approving murmur came from the listening walls, as summer leaves rustle when the west wind kisses them, and Diaphernes, smiling, went on:

“Dost thou remember that in thy mortal days one told thee that the beginning of all evil was in woman?”

“I do, my lord.”

“Dost thou remember how thou didst put this to the test, and prove it to the very hilt ?

“Ay, my lord, right well.”

“Then hearken. When first I cast off the yoke of—God” (he hissed it out with an effort), “and turned My hands against His works, I thought of earth. Alighting on the then new surface of the world, I lied me to Eden, aglow with the dawn of natural beauty, and there found man. No greater wonder ever filled me than I experienced at the sight of that first mortal, so perfect, so flawless. The mechanism of his bones and organs was wondrously complete. I stayed, I watched him as he lived and moved and held rule over every other living thing, in all his words and thoughts and deeds the reflected image of his Maker. For long I waited and pondered. Then my Antagonist created for man his playmate, the weaker, frailer woman; and before the work was completed, rested from His labour. And I carried on, unseen, the work. Into the impressionable, half-formed character I poured new qualities. I made her such that some of the love man had given to God should pass to her; I put strange thoughts into the unfilled brain-cells; I sowed the germs of vanity, cruelty, and selfishness in the unawakened heart; and still my Enemy rested. Then I laughed to see the outward form of His handiwork, the beautiful lifeless woman lying stretched out on the ground beside the sleeping Adam—fair enough for one of the angels of heaven, yet inwardly so fit to carry on my work. Then God arose, took up the form of the woman, and breathed into her the breath of life. Awakening, Adam found her bending over him, so like, yet so unlike himself—and from that instant the soul of woman, craving for love, set herself to win his heart. Thanks for the first principles I had implanted, she was ripe for my persuasions; and I led her up by easy steps to the desire for the Tree of Knowledge. She took of the fruit, and having tasted herself, sought the presence of the yet sinless man. And so well she pleaded her cause, her arms enfolding him and her eyes looking into his soul, that his strength failed him and he did her bidding for the love he bore her. Such, O thou that hast been the soul of a man, was the story of the mother-woman, and many of her daughters have been faithful followers in her ways. Around the crimson shade of Samson’s faithless bride, myriads of less famous Delilahs form a court, even down to the present day, when they lay their snares for the feet of unwary men. Therefore, my servant, learn this: bend woman to thy will if thou canst, but never trust her. And as with mortal woman, so with the woman spirits that are immortal; they will live and win thee if they can.

“Again, I say, beware of Sagatheela. Her day is almost over. Resist her but once more and thou art mine, untroubled. She will try to persuade thee that she loves thee. Do not I, Diaphernes, love thee too? Spurn her then, she is false—false—and mocks thee in her soul. Be bold of heart, go

forth, withstand, conquer—remembering that Diaphernes is not only thy sovereign, but thy friend. My help is thine for the asking. Can I rely on thee ?

“Implicitly, my master!” I said firmly, and my voice rang through the vaulted hall, waking the million echoes.

I yielded my will under the spell of those wondrous eyes that never left mine, and fell, I suppose, into a sort of trance, for I cannot affirm what further he asked me, nor what I answered. He was by no means displeased, so whatever I said or did must have been in accordance with his will.

As I turned to go, however, his parting words rang out sharp and clear, and there was a look yet unknown to me on the splendid face. Something in his attitude and bearing filled me with an unspeakable dread. Was he after all an awful fiend, a creature of torment? And was I a prisoner in some nightmare castle, fenced about with breathing walls and accompanied by unsightly phantoms? Was this being in front of me a pitiless torture revelling in the damnation of my soul? I shook in silent terror.

But he waved his hand and smiled, and all was changed again.

“Farewell!” he cried, with a glance of unspeakable tenderness. “Be constant, loyal, and brave, and, on my royal word, every soul here will envy thee thy reward!

Then Aginarius led me forth from the presence; and the walls sighed “farewell” as we passed, and we climbed the groaning staircase into black, blinding space.

Methought my guide was about to turn upon me with malignity, when the sandals fitted themselves closer to my heels and bore me away. And ever onwards as they carried me; the ringing words of Diaphernes followed:

“Be thou constant, loyal, and brave.”

The cold dark wind from Monelpisia repeated it, the twisting sobbing trees groaned it out; the stones in the desert echoed it, and it was written in the darting rays of the sun.

“Be thou constant, loyal, and brave.”

Down I plunged through the bright blue atmosphere towards the sparkling earth, the cruel mother earth, the globe of the mortals whom I hated so.

THE LAST CHAPTER

THE GREAT CRYING OF DIAPHERNES

I stared around me. Strange! Where had I seen the room before? The bare floor, with its chipped and grimy boards—the tiny fireplace with the crumbling hearthstone, and narrow, cracked, dirty mantelpiece; the black chest serving as washing-stand and dressing-table combined, the filthy, indistinguishable prints on the walls, the crazy bed in the far corner, it all seemed familiar, and memory was struggling hard to assert itself.

Through the smeary window-pane I saw the broad white road, deserted except for a policeman, and one or two of the utterly homeless and weary; poor wretches denied even the comfort of a doorstep on which to rest their aching bones, and where they might momentarily close their heavy eyelids. They must get up—walk on. Where? oh, anywhere! But if they drop from weariness? Well, we can't help that! I turned again to study the room, and a scene came vision-like before my eyes.

I saw a young man, pale and sickly, with a hunted expression in his thin face, come stumbling over the dirty threshold. He clasped his head with his hands, as if the pain within was more than he could bear.

He staggered to the window and silently contemplated the scene below. Then the roar of vehicles and the sound of voices came rushing through the night air. I saw again the crowded thoroughfare, the street alight with lamps, the throng of men and women going their heedless way; everything he saw was seen by me. At last, with a heavy sigh that told of final abandonment, he left the window, threw himself on the bed, and for a while lay still. Then he raised his face, and in the fitful moonshine, I recognised myself.

The puzzle was solved. I was in York Road, in the garret wherein Paul Penruddock had existed and died.

Instinctively, with the memory of that last struggle fresh upon me, I turned towards the mantelpiece. It was the same, only dirtier, more cracked, more tottering than ever, as if an uncautious touch must inevitably send it into fragments; and there in the same place, with the ghostly moonlight full upon it, as it had shone once before, was a little blue phial of roughened glass with an ominous red label.

I was staggered with bewilderment at the coincidence. Must I undergo those too well remembered agonies of mortal death once more? Or had that awful struggle never taken place? Had I only been dreaming things in a fancy-land, where horrible inventions needed no master brain. Had I never entered Monelpisia, nor seen the beauty of Diaphernes? Was the Avenue of Gloom a mere wandering of a fevered mind?

If such were indeed the case—but my eyes bent downwards and caught the glitter of a pair of sandals. My doubts died away. I looked again at the ragged bed against the wall. Bed was too grand a name for such a thing, and, truly enough, among the soiled and tumbled blankets lay the semblance of a human being. But the face was obscured by a grizzled beard and tousled, matted hair. I approached, and bending down, closely examined the prostrate form. It bore no resemblance to Paul Penruddock. It was emaciated, drawn, prematurely aged, and wrinkled, hot with a raging fever that was fast sapping its vitals.

This was plainly a man who had led an evil life, and had of his own free will and choice laid down and paved his road from earth to Monelpisia.

I looked again, and read the chronicles of that life within that sleeping soul. Beginning at the latest days, I traced him back from age to youth, and from youth to infancy.

Poverty! six months in York Road, where he had barely managed to exist, hampered by added years and dwindling health. Years of prison-life within four pitiless walls; work without pleasure and plenty of work; food without flavour, and little food; oaths without limit, foul and damning. A prisoner in the dock; a string of witnesses, a woman's evidence the most convincing; a jury without dissent, and the utmost penalty that the law allows.

Further back, the lack of money finds for remedy a deed of forgery; the pleasures of society are not without their financial exactments, and a dual existence is discovered by the revengeful mood of a woman. A fortune wrongfully obtained leads on through vice to retribution, and a well-known mercantile house loses the services of its managing partner. I stopped with a grim foreboding, and forebore to read further. This aged, dissipated, prison-wrecked creature, in a state of semi-starvation, was assuming a likeness to some one of my earthly days. The bend of the long thin nose and the lift of the eyebrows were associated in my mind with a supercilious nature. I knew the lofty forehead, the trend of the blue veins that formed a V, the shape of the long slender hands. I was not standing by the side of a stranger.

The hands, roughened to coarseness, had yet some traces of former refinement; the rest of illness had allowed the recovery of form to the filbert nails. Everything about the man tallied with past associations—yet I strove in vain to fix my wandering recollections. A name was on my tongue; it was:

Accursed memory, cheating me again! With thy false leadings thou art indeed a woman. Tantalise me, mock at me, smile on me, promise me satisfaction, win my faith, and—leave me as before.

Still the name plays with my tongue, and I get no further. Again and again I essay—then give up in despair, and finally try again.

At last I am on the verge of abandoning the search, for loath though I am to confess it, the belief that I shall never discover the man's identity is gaining upon me.

Leaning against the wall, and looking at nothing in particular, my eyes by chance settle on a chocolate-coloured stain I have not before observed. Vaguely I wonder what it is and how it came there, till suddenly over it appeared, written in silver like the rays of the moon, the name I had been seeking—CRAWLEY LANGTON.

Some minutes passed ere I was even conscious of active thought: but when I began to think, my wonder knew no bounds. However strange the answer on the wall had been and whatever caused it, at least it had told me what memory refused to say. Without doubt, the man was Crawley Langton. And why had I been sent on such an errand?

Without hesitation the answer came. Diaphernes had allowed me the opportunity of fulfilling the ambition of my soul. My enemy was given over into my hands, even as I had desired. O most wise, most loving, love-compelling prince!

Was it to appease the unspoken restless cravings of my soul that I had been sent hither to make my final stand against the wiles of Sagatheela?

“The vengeance of a man,” I muttered, “against the cunning resources of a woman. Well—we shall see!”

And here in front of me lay the man who had made my youth a hell, who had wrecked my boyish ideals, who had stepped between me and my love, and twice blasted all the prospects of my life. Now the circumstances were reversed. I was strong and he was weak. I could make him suffer as I had suffered, be tempted as I was—and doubtless make him fall as I had fallen. Right well I meant to play my part.

“Wretch!” I exclaimed, striding forth and standing in the moonlight—“wretch—abominable oppressor: it shall be word for word, blow for blow, stab for stab, of all the injuries thou hast done to me. Thou aged coward, years have not proved a shield against the penetration of my vengeance—nor shall sickness exonerate thee, nor pity plead on thy behalf. Where are thy costly clothes, thy handsome gifts bought with the wealth that should have been mine? Where is the strength of thy manhood, the boastful glory of thy youth? Where are the friends who did not disdain to hear thy accusations of a helpless boy? I tell thee, thou art as destitute of allies as I ever was! And if I was damned for a deed and words which savoured less of baseness than of despair, thou art thrice damned by thy whole life; and the fiends about the mouth of the pit wait hungrily for thy coming.”

There was not a sound to be heard. It was London's silent hour, just before the dawn, when the hordes of night have gone to rest—and those of day are not yet awakened. Where, a few hours before, a man might pause at a crossing and wait impatiently for a break in the long, crawling lines of traffic, there were now empty spaces and the awe of a great stillness. The deadly calm, the cold night air, the weird moonlight, made it like a picture of some plague-stricken and

deserted city. It spread from north to south, from east to west, unbroken by louder echoes than the tramp of the policemen on their beat.

It appealed to me with unwonted fascination as I waited in that lonely garret for the sick man to awake.

And the dawn broke with its light in the east. A figure emerged from Tennyson Street, shook out the collar of his coat, smoothed down his trousers, and set off at a quick walk towards Westminster. He was a printer, bound by the ties of modern bondage to be in his place at work by four o'clock.

Another man followed, and another—and by degrees the street seemed to fill with these early toilers. Yet through all the trampling, my client slept peacefully; not an eyelid moved, not a nerve twitched, and had it not been for the slight heaving of the wretched blankets over his chest, he might have been already lying in the clutch of Death.

All outside interests became lost again in the single contemplation of my enemy. The world shrank into insignificance, the souls of other men were the merest nonentities. My existence was focussed into my antagonism with this one man.

I looked at him in every light, pondered over every peculiarity, reviewed again a hundred different points in the strange anomaly of his life; then went through in detail the vicissitudes of my own earthly life, drew from this comparison the same conclusion. Amidst this mingling of ideas one thought was ever paramount, precluding any attempted argument, robbing me of the enjoyment of quiet thought, filling me with the maddening desire to arouse the sleeper, adorning the walls with strange phantasies, floating before my sight, twisting, revolving, approaching, retreating. It bore many forms, but always conveyed the same meaning—the vision of revenge.

Was it my excited imagination, or the incoming of the grey dawn, upon the deceptive moonlight—Or indeed a visitor from the world of spirits? I knew not: but I saw a white and evil face protrude through one of the panels of the door and stare at me. There was such malignity in the pale grey eyes, such mocking cruelty in the thin, writhing lips, such expectancy in the gleam of the pointed teeth, that I shrank back involuntarily. It was too evil even for me! But when I looked again the thing was gone.

I could not forget it, and leaned against the mantelpiece shaking as if I had been a mortal man stricken with ague. But my faculties soon returned into action; and I was again swayed by the burning frenzy for revenge.

My glance fell upon Langton. I gloated over the hollow cheeks, the melancholy countenance, the ashen hue that spoke of so near an approach to death. Like a murderer crawling into the hushed apartment of the sleeping, I crept closer, closer, squatting upon my haunches like some huge ape. Then I stopped in greedy anticipation, made a bound, and alighted full upon his chest. His breath already came in fetid puffs that suggested an earth-heaped coffin. Cursed dreams were upon him, and the peace of his sleep had passed away. He tossed to and fro, and muttered amid his groaning, "Food! for mercy's sake, food! No breakfast, no dinner, no supper! Nothing to-day, nothing yesterday, nothing to-morrow! Oh, give me food! Do you hear? Oh, sir, give me food, I'm starving! I'll carry your bag, do anything for you, all for a single penny! You won't? You won't even look at me? Then curse you for a hard-hearted brute! Yes, curse you, curse you!"

His whimperings made me laugh. He continued:

"I'm not strong enough, warder; the work is killing me. I have been used to an outdoor life; let me do anything but bend over this hateful carpentering. You won't? D—n you, then! The governor? What's the good of asking him, he's paid to treat us all like dogs."

For some minutes he ceased to speak, merely muttering incoherently and breathing in shorter, sharper gasps.

I longed to awaken him. But no; his lips were in motion again.

“Fourteen years! The injustice of it! I shall go mad before the term has fairly commenced. How pleased those vixens look. They would go ten miles to see me hanged, or better still, tortured on a rack. What a fool I’ve been to spend a farthing on them! Suppers at the Criterion, rides in the Row! And here they are to see me sent to slavery and criticise me. We always thought he would come to this. A regular stage villain! Ah yes, my beauties, I can see you, I know what you are saying. Curse you, curse you all; curse the day I ever saw a woman. But who is this? Ha, ha, she is not quite so well dressed as she used to be! Why is she here? What can she know of this matter? Come to darken my antecedents, cruelty, desertion, et-cetera. Oh, it’s too ridiculous! Deprive a woman of her honour, of her reputation; *her* reputation indeed! thrown out of work, a wreck! Miss Alice Carpenter, let me congratulate you on your *debut* as a star comedienne—or shall I say tragedienne? Bravo!”

My client paused. But all my nature was aflame at the name of the woman I had once loved. This gibbering wretch was stirring up my recollections far too well. The name he uttered had completed the link between the present and the past, and, as I then thought, immutably sealed his fate. But he wandered on:

“Paul again! Drat the boy, with his pale face. But he isn’t a boy now—a seedy, out-at-elbows clerk. I wonder if he knew me. With Alice, too. I don’t know why I hate him so; it must be one of those aversions men are born with. But poor Paul: it is the second time I have ruined him. Poor Paul!”

The repetition of my name in the tremulous tones of exhaustion only maddened me more. It was the character, the tone of these words that touched the keynote of my memory, that revived in their fulness the insults of my boyhood, that placed before me in full detail the picture of the young man and his mother. They galled me even now, thinking over them.

As I listened to the droning voice, the pent-up passions of youth, the bitter indignations of manhood, the ranklings of an immortal hatred, rushed through my soul. When, after years of struggling, buffeting, privation, and despair, a man at length *succeeds*, there is a brief period of perfect triumph which marks the turn of the tide. But, as far as my memory bore me back, I had been a sufferer and an exile, uncompensated. The ambitions of Paul Penruddock had never been fulfilled; and when on that eventful night Agonostes entered Monelpisia, the soul was filled with new ideas, new aspirations, and a voice was always whispering to me of vengeance.

Long I had thought of, and nourished, vengeance. And this was the hour of my triumph. I sat upon that bed and waited, as happy as Evil could make one who loved it.

The changing light from dawn to day was swelling and increasing, bringing with it the accompanying noise and bustle of a busy town. And still my client slept.

At length one dream more horrible than the rest penetrated through his slumber so that he started into wakefulness. He lay and panted, and his moaning and sighing was pleasant in my ears. It was the first part of my revenge, and the rest was yet to come.

The crisis could no longer be postponed. I felt his pulse and was amazed to find how feebly it was beating. Death would claim him ere long; and I must act promptly, for it must be my death that he should die. Another thing puzzled me. Where was Sagatheela? Were the warnings of Diaphernes vain and needless after all? At any rate, I must work.

One of Langton's hands was twitching feebly at the bedclothes, the other lay as if paralysed by his side. His eyeballs were dull and filmy, the sweat of the tomb was gathering on his brow, and I saw the form of death itself hovering outside the window. The poor fool began again to babble.

"Was I cruel to you, Alice? Did I persuade you to trust me and then abandon you to infamy? Had you not always a leaning towards evil, or were you ever pure and virtuous? If you were, then, as I am at the point of death, I implore your forgiveness."

I was waxing impatient.

"My step-brother? I paid him out for the thrashing he gave me. Mother, mother, why do you look so frightened?" He leaned forward and spoke in the low hurried voice of one imparting a crucial confidence: "Look here, we must get rid of him. We may be poor—he may be rich. It's a good estate—think of it, mother! Well, I've done it! It's hidden in his drawer!" Then his tones changed again to terrified supplication. "Paul, can you I or-give me, Paul? Poor Paul—I wonder why I am thinking so much of you. I have a good deal on my conscience. I own it, but nothing seems to weigh so heavy as my sin against Paul. It was a cruel thing—a damning sin."

"It was," I echoed, "damning."

"Will God forgive me?" he droned on. "Can such a sin be washed out in Christ's blood?"

And I answered, "No."

"Sometimes," he maundered on, "I think there is no God."

"You are right," I said. "There is none."

"If that be true, then why do I bewail the past?"

"And why," I suggested, "live a moment longer—why not elude the sting of a lingering death of sickness?"

"Why not, indeed?" he said, and half rose, but fell back with a shudder.

"I must be mad to think of such a thing," he mumbled.

Death had come into the room now, and I could see him waiting. Lucky for me, I thought, that Langton could not also see. My time was short.

"Why mad?" I asked again.

"So unnatural."

"If there is no God, why fear Nature?"

"Not even if I violate her?"

"To ease thy pain? Thou fool, think not of Nature but of thyself—Nature is selfish enough already."

"But—how shall I do it?"

I bent forward and whispered in his ear. My suggestion drove the life-blood from his heart; a momentary flash of madness lighted the dull eyes, and he held out both hands to me, though he saw me not.

"Poison!" he gasped. "Poison! Yes, I know it is there."

And he gloated over the word as a miser over his coins. "Poison—poison!"

It was childishness in the face of death—weird, but not out of place in that haunted room.

Laying my hand on his shoulder, I re-echoed the word. And there we sat close together, the early morning sun peeping in on us through the dirty windows—I holding him close to me, he drinking in the very venom of my mind, while Death held aloof, grinning on us both, tempter and tempted.

"Poison!" Big Ben from Westminster rang out the double-syllabled sound, and the tramp of the people in the streets beat time to it. The air was full of it; the tiny trails of smoke from the

chimneys wrote it in grey letters against the sky. The crazy walls trembled, the broken floor creaked, all to the same note, "Poison."

My client raised himself with difficulty upon his right elbow, and I wound my arm closer about him. He tried to rise, trembled, swayed, and fell. Again he tried, and failed; and again. And after each attempt the interval was longer, the recovery more painful. My chance was fleeting fast. Then he cried out in pain, and I felt the thrill of agony passing through him. Every instant was precious. I sent the black, damning thoughts pouring from my mind to his.

"Dare I?" he cried. "Oh, dare I? What of my soul?"

"What became of the soul of Paul Penruddock?" I asked.

I felt him wince and shudder, saw the thin lips contract over the teeth, knew that he tried to pronounce some words, and gloated over his failure. I went on pitilessly:

"Paul is dead. His soul, like his body, is dust. All souls, like the concomitant bodies, are built from dust, and to that dust evolution ordains that they must return. And thou hast murdered Paul."

"Murdered Paul? Who says so? I did not know he died."

"Still thou art a murderer. Who robbed him of home, employment, bread, and hope? Is that not being indeed the agent of his death? Is there no form of murder save that done red-handed with an earthly weapon?"

"Then the greatest crime man can commit is charged against my name."

"Yes—for his death is at thy door."

"Who says so?"

"I—Paul Penruddock."

"Paul Penruddock? But one told me just now that Paul was dead—that his soul was dead with him."

I had made an error, but hastened to recover ground.

"Listen! I am, and am not, Paul Penruddock. The men and women who make most impression upon our minds are stamped with such solidity on our memories as to remain there for ever. And so they appear to us in all but flesh and body, and play with our imaginations. Thus then 'tis Paul who speaks, yet Paul himself is nowhere, buried and forgotten in the grave of a pauper suicide. 'Tis scarcely even the soul of his ghost, seeing there is no future state for any soul. 'Tis but his memory, conjured up within mine and thine."

There were tears of anguish coursing down my client's cheeks, but there was no mercy in me. I sat and chuckled at the readiness of my own resources.

"And my soul?" he said plaintively.

"Fool! Talk not of souls, and such idle superstition. Man is but a figure in a dream that comes and goes, directed by chance and circumstance. The fear of the future is but a distorted fancy, drawn perhaps from the certainty of human legal punishment, which became indispensable, owing to man's natural passions, and forms the basis of the theory of good and evil. Put aside then the fear of death, and thou wilt be certain thou hast naught to dread—naught in comparison with the lingering agonies of fever. See! arise and drink!"

I directed his eyes towards the bottle, and saw with joy the wistful longing in their depths.

"See!" he echoed. "What do I see?"

"A sure and faithful remedy for all thine ills; the one true friend of suffering man. Rise and drink."

"Poison! Not that—not that!" He cried aloud and beat the air. I could see he knotty bones almost protruding through the starved flesh.

“Can I, dare I—must I?” he whined, when the first paroxysm of passion was over.

I caught him fiercely in my arms, and sneered—

“Coward still, as ever!”

The taunt stirred up his dying faculties. With a feeble movement he threw off the coverings and slid on to the stained and shaking floor. It was the acme of my triumph. I supported the frail and tottering form to its doom—and Death followed. On—to his soul’s damnation—conqueror and conquered.

“The hand of Destiny is but the hand of Retribution.”

I had heard the saying once, and it seemed to fit the moment. As he had been relentless, so had I; as he had caused my fall, so should I his. Even as he had pursued, hated, and destroyed, so could I! At my mercy, in my arms, lay Crawley Langton, the bitterest enemy man ever had, destroyer of the prospects of my life, seducer of the woman I had loved, libertine, gambler, thief. A noble captive—indeed! and this was the gift of Diaphernes to me! I was avenged.

Then, suddenly—and it came with a dull shock of wonder—I knew that Sagatheela was also at his side. And, strange to say, she was not opposing his weak progress, rather acquiescing in my movements. Name of Diaphernes, what new scheme was this? All at once I heard her voice.

“Pray!” she said; “pray! For in this last moment, God may give thee grace to redeem a misspent life.”

But she did not say, “Turn back!”

He was standing by the rusty fireplace now, and I looked at him with that new, tormenting impulse that urged me to save Aginarius from overwhelming numbers; that had made me long to stop and help the screaming shade in the awful avenue. He was such a poor, suffering, broken thing to deliver to the fiends of that appalling pit, for well I knew that even Diaphernes could never make of him a soldier.

He stood, gazing at the bottle but never touching it; dazed, stupid, lost to thought, only battling with the increasing difficulty of physical breath.

“God is Love,” said Sagatheela. And with a voice different from any I had heard, there was so much of hope in it, she spoke to me also, “Oh, Agonostes, God is Love.”

And I—was I tongue-tied? What of those warnings of my master?

“Love!” I said. “That is what women talk of.”

“I have had enough of love,” said Langton wearily. “And yet—the right sort of love must be a good thing. I don’t think I ever found it.”

I would fain have mocked at love once more; for once the ready words failed me. Had not I, too, once loved a woman? I seemed to go out of the garret and away, away very far back. It was not in great sinful London—it was not Alice Carpenter; it was not even the kindly ranch maiden who had comforted the heartsick stranger; it was certainly not the woman-spirit Sagatheela whom I had never clearly seen. I felt my own touch on the sufferer growing lighter and kinder—there were trees and birds and pretty things about me; and somebody loved me—in the right way. Who was it? Fool that I was! I had vowed my love to Diaphernes; I had loved none else, and never could.

The form between us was convulsed with pain—and Death came a little nearer.

“Drink!” I said savagely. “How long wilt thou bear this—thou slave under the lash? What was good enough for Paul is too good for thee!”

He braced himself with an effort, and the shaking fingers closed over the blue bottle.

“Paul again!” he quivered. “I don’t think I should mind dying if I thought poor Paul could forgive me.”

And I laughed—yet mirthlessly.

He had taken the second hand from the corner of the mantelpiece to remove the stopper from the phial. But he was too weak to stand alone, and swayed so that he all but fell. Swift as I had been, Sagatheela had been swifter, and had guided his thin fingers back. To a firmer hold? No.

And once again I wondered what the meaning of this might be. This spirit, who claimed to be so loving and so pitiful, had caused the hand of the sufferer to grasp the shelf where it was broken, rotten, and torn half away from the plaster already. It tottered—yielded—and gave way. Crash! with a noise that echoed through the house, with it fell mine enemy, still grasping the blue bottle in his other hand.

Even as he fell, I heard the tinkle of something light and metallic that rang against the rusty fender. Moved by an uncontrollable impulse, I bent forward.

“Do not look—do not look. It is a snare.”

The words were powerful and full of melody. They had all the majesty of a royal command, mingled with the beseeching of a lover. Was Diaphernes here, and speaking to me?

I paused but a moment. With this cloud of memory hanging about me, bewildering and limiting every thought and action, I *must* and I *would* see and know all I could.

And there, under the very fingers of my dying enemy, lay a tiny golden cross.

Was it Sagatheela speaking now, or had one said it years ago, and the echo been shut up within the tottering wall:

“Thy mother’s God.”

Truly, I had loved a woman once. Again I was the child Paul, roaming in the meadows and plucking the flowers. I saw the dear old resting-places, the familiar corners, the faces of long-dead friends, and, above all, my mother. I remembered many quiet, simple talks in undisturbed corners; sweet words breathed at night beside my little bed, soft protecting arms, and the unspeakable tenderness of loving lips.

And my work, my triumph that was to be, filled me with repulsion. I saw myself as my mother would have seen me, in all my loathsome, murderous, self-chosen vileness. My lean brown body, the foul, scaly, shining sandals—and then thoughts of the beauty of the unselfish love in those pure devoted eyes. I cowered in hopeless degradation, even as if she were present, and had found me engaged in my odious occupation.

“Paul, thou art changed,” she seemed to say sadly, and I hated myself the more for the sorrow in her voice.

I dropped my client’s hand and stood motionless.

Yet there was another agency at work. My plighted vows before the throne of the inner crypt were not to be so lightly set aside. I had loved Diaphernes. I certainly feared him. On the other hand there was:

“Thy mother’s God.”

From far away there came a stern reminder. “Be faithful, loyal, and brave.”

Again my hand slipped down to that of Langton. I glanced towards the doorway; a tall figure seemed to come nearer and nearer until it stood in the room; the very majestic presence of the prince himself.

The terrible tension was broken by the voice of the sick man. In the twitchings of his fingers he had dropped the splintered wood and picked up, all unconsciously, the fallen cross. There he lay gasping on the bare boards, the poison phial in one hand and my mother’s gift in the other.

“I believe I could love Paul a little, if I thought would forgive.”

Diaphernes spoke not, only smiled. But the smile said more than many words, and I again laid my hand on that which held the bottle. Then a sense of the cowardice of it smote me; there were the prince, and Death, and I, and our prey a man who was dying already.

“I need not interfere,” I told myself. “He is damned enough without me.”

“Listen!” said Sagatheela. “What of the forgiveness of Christ, who alone can pardon Paul and thee?”

“I dare not—I dare not. I never knew anything about Him.”

“But He knows thee. He cares for thee. He gave His own life that thou, and those like thee, might not perish everlastingly. Pray—pray while there is time. And oh! there is joy in the presence of God over one sinner that repenteth.”

“Speak!” hissed Diaphernes.

And I would not.

“If I thought Paul, whom I knew, could forgive,” the poor wretch sobbed, “I might believe even in the pardon of Christ, whom I have never known.”

“Speak! Refuse!” thundered Diaphernes.

And I stood silent.

A score of threatening faces gibbered around me, the sun went in, and the air of the room became fetid and stifling; but through the mist and vapour I always saw that upturned face and the skeleton-like hands gripping the bottle and the cross. Then the whole room was ablaze with a crimson light like the inside of a fiery furnace; waves of flame hissed and roared about me; phantoms from the evil world spread out their filthy claws to tear me; a hundred voices bellowed in my ears; the walls swung to and fro, the boards lifted up and down, the grimy ceiling⁷ seemed to close upon our heads, and still I kept my place. Then I felt Sagatheela draw nearer to me in the midst of the horror; her soft hands touched me, and her quiet voice, unshaken by all the alarms, reached my ears:

“Agonistes! Be great, and forgive; Christ, the greatest of all, is so forgiving. And thy mother loved Him.”

* * *

Another instant of silence, and I had chosen. Half-afraid, I leaned over and touched the cross with fingers almost as trembling as those of the dying man himself.

“Crawley Langton,” I skid, “I, who was Paul Penruddock, forgive thee; even as I pray to Christ to forgive both me and thee.”

And the blue bottle fell and shivered into atoms, while its contents flowed across the floor to the very feet of Diaphernes.

There was a cry, so terrible that it petrified my soul, and before the foulness of the apparition I saw, my emancipated soul turned sick with horror. It was so wholly vile, so repellent, so unapproachably disgusting; and yet under all the transformation I traced the figure and lineaments of Diaphernes. Gone was all the god-like majesty, the wonderful tender grace, the magic of the deep, far-seeing eyes; it was only rendered the more horrible by the absolute perfection of form and feature which abode with it even then. Just for a moment of time he hung aloft, the very incarnation of defeated malice, then, with a parting yell which swept through the room like a hurricane, Diaphernes departed from my sight.

And I looked down at my own body and wondered at its whiteness and symmetry; and again daring to lift my eyes, there, standing on the other side of the recumbent form of Crawley

Langton, was *she*—Sagatheela, whom I had never yet clearly seen. Was it possible there could be such beauty, and that I, Agonostes, might see it and live? In that beauty of love, and of holiness, all the evil things I had said and thought of women vanished like an evil dream. But could she pardon all I had done and said? I knelt on the floor and hid my face.

“Weep not, Agonostes,” she said. “Dost thou regret that thou mayest at last behold me?”

“Ah, Sagatheela,” I said, “I have been blind—had I but known! Yet, why is it that thou hast loved me? And I cannot believe that thy love is living still.”

“If I ever loved thee, Agonostes, I love thee now; and as for forgiveness, hast thou not thyself learned the gladness of forgiving?”

And together we bent over the form lying so still between us.

“Wait,” said Sagatheela, “my place is here, and thine with me.”

The haggard head was raised for a moment.

“Penruddock—Paul! Good God! it is—it can’t be—it is—you! You, the white-faced boy I hated! You—you! That trick! Can you forgive me that? Then again—Alice! Can you forgive me that? You can! Ah! then, Christ, forgive me too!”

A look of peace swept over his face—the evil lines of years were rapidly chased out by the calm hand of my Sagatheela. She had saved us both, and when the end had come and we had watched his spirit glide out into the bright air and vanish, we, too, with one last, lingering look, bade farewell to York Road and the sordid surroundings of poverty and crime.