

The Incantation

by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1803-1873

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I

"I believe that for at least twelve hours there will be no change in her state. I believe also that if she recover from it, calm and refreshed, as from a sleep, the danger of death will have passed away."

"And for twelve hours my presence would be hurtful?"

"Rather say fatal, if my diagnosis be right."

I wrung my friend's hand, and we parted.

Oh, to lose her now; now that her love and her reason had both returned, each more vivid than before! Futile, indeed, might be Margrave's boasted secret; but at least in that secret was hope.

In recognized science I saw only despair.

And at that thought all dread of this mysterious visitor vanished— all anxiety to question more of his attributes or his history. His life itself became to me dear and precious. What if it should fail me in the steps of the process, whatever that was, by which the life of my Lilian might be saved!

The shades of evening were now closing in. I remembered that I had left Margrave without even food for many hours. I stole round to the back of the house, filled a basket with elements more generous than those of the former day; extracted fresh drugs from my stores, and, thus laden, hurried back to the hut. I found Margrave in the room below, seated on his mysterious coffer, leaning his face on his hand. When I entered, he looked up, and said:

"You have neglected me. My strength is waning. Give me more of the cordial, for we have work before us tonight, and I need support."

He took for granted my assent to his wild experiment; and he was right.

I administered the cordial. I placed food before him, and this time he did not eat with repugnance. I poured out wine, and he drank it sparingly, but with ready compliance, saying, "In perfect health, I looked upon wine as poison; now it is like a foretaste of the glorious elixir."

After he had thus recruited himself, he seemed to acquire an energy that startlingly contrasted with his languor the day before; the effort of breathing was scarcely perceptible; the color came back to his cheeks; his bended frame rose elastic and erect.

"If I understood you rightly," said I, "the experiment you ask me to aid can be accomplished in a single night?"

"In a single night—this night."

"Command me. Why not begin at once? What apparatus or chemical agencies do you need?"

"Ah!" said Margrave. "Formerly, how I was misled! Formerly, how my conjectures blundered! I thought, when I asked you to give a month to the experiment I wish to make, that I should need the subtlest skill of the chemist. I then believed, with Van Helmont, that the principle of life is a gas, and that the secret was but in the mode by which the gas might be rightly administered. But now, all that I need is contained in this coffer, save one very simple material—fuel sufficient for a steady fire for six hours. I see even that is at hand, piled up in your outhouse. And now for the substance itself—to that you must guide me."

"Explain."

"Near this very spot is there not gold—in mines yet undiscovered— and gold of the purest metal?"

"There is. What then? Do you, with the alchemists, blend in one discovery, gold and life?"

"No. But it is only where the chemistry of earth or of man produces gold, that the substance from which the great pabulum of life is extracted by ferment can be found. Possibly, in the attempts at that transmutation of metals, which I think your own great chemist, Sir Humphry Davy, allowed might be possible, but held not to be worth the cost of the process—possibly, in those attempts, some scanty grains of this substance were found by the alchemists, in the crucible, with grains of the metal as niggardly yielded by pitiful mimicry of Nature's stupendous laboratory; and from such grains enough of the essence might, perhaps, have been

drawn forth, to add a few years of existence to some feeble graybeard—granting, what rests on no proofs, that some of the alchemists reached an age rarely given to man. But it is not in the miserly crucible, it is in the matrix of Nature herself, that we must seek in prolific abundance Nature's grand principle—life. As the loadstone is rife with the magnetic virtue, as amber contains the electric, so in this substance, to which we yet want a name, is found the bright life-giving fluid. In the old gold mines of Asia and Europe the substance exists, but can rarely be met with. The soil for its nutriment may there be well nigh exhausted. It is here, where Nature herself is all vital with youth, that the nutriment of youth must be sought. Near this spot is gold; guide me to it."

"You cannot come with me. The place which I know as auriferous is some miles distant, the way rugged. You cannot walk to it. It is true I have horses, but—"

"Do you think I have come this distance and not foreseen and forestalled all that I want for my object? Trouble yourself not with conjectures how I can arrive at the place. I have provided the means to arrive at and leave it. My litter and its bearers are in reach of my call. Give me your arm to the rising ground, fifty yards from your door."

I obeyed mechanically, stifling all surprise. I had made my resolve, and admitted no thought that could shake it.

When we reached the summit of the grassy hillock, which sloped from the road that led to the seaport, Margrave, after pausing to recover breath, lifted up his voice, in a key, not loud, but shrill and slow and prolonged, half cry and half chant, like the nighthawk's. Through the air—so limpid and still, bringing near far objects, far sounds—the voice pierced its way, artfully pausing, till wave after wave of the atmosphere bore and transmitted it on.

In a few minutes the call seemed re-echoed, so exactly, so cheerily, that for the moment I thought that the note was the mimicry of the shy mocking lyre bird, which mimics so merrily all that it hears in its coverts, from the whir of the locust to the howl of the wild dog.

"What king," said the mystical charmer, and as he spoke he carelessly rested his hand on my shoulder, so that I trembled to feel that this dread son of Nature, Godless and soulless, who had been—and, my heart whispered, who still could be—my bane and mind darkener, leaned upon me for support, as the spoiled younger-born on his brother—"what king," said this cynical mocker, with his beautiful boyish face—"what king in your civilized Europe has the sway of a chief of the East? What link is so strong between mortal and mortal as that between lord and slave? I transport you poor fools from the land of their birth; they preserve here their old habits—obedience and awe. They would wait till they starved in the solitude—wait to hearken and answer my call. And I, who thus rule them, or charm them—I use and despise them. They know that, and yet serve me! Between you and me, my philosopher, there is but one thing worth living for—life for oneself."

Is it age, is it youth, that thus shocks all my sense, in my solemn completeness of man? Perhaps, in great capitals, young men of pleasure will answer, "It is youth; and we think what he says!" Young friends, I do not believe you.

II

Along the grass track I saw now, under the moon, just risen, a strange procession—never seen before in Australian pastures. It moved on, noiselessly but quickly. We descended the hillock, and met it on the way; a sable litter, borne by four men, in unfamiliar Eastern garments; two other servitors, more bravely dressed, with yataghans and silver-hilted pistols in their belts, preceded this somber equipage. Perhaps Margrave divined the disdainful thought that passed through my mind, vaguely and half-unconsciously; for he said with a hollow, bitter laugh that had replaced the lively peal of his once melodious mirth:

"A little leisure and a little gold, and your raw colonist, too, will have the tastes of a pasha."

I made no answer. I had ceased to care who and what was my tempter. To me his whole being was resolved into one problem: had he a secret by which death could be turned from Lilian?

But now, as the litter halted, from the long, dark shadow which it cast upon the turf, the figure of a woman emerged and stood before us. The outlines of her shape were lost in the loose folds of a black mantle, and the features of her face were hidden by a black veil, except only the dark-bright, solemn eyes. Her stature was lofty, her bearing majestic, whether in movement or repose.

Margrave accosted her in some language unknown to me. She replied in what seemed to me the same tongue. The tones of her voice were sweet, but inexpressibly mournful. The words that they uttered appeared intended to warn, or deprecate, or dissuade; but they called to Margrave's brow a lowering frown, and drew from his lips a burst of unmistakable anger. The woman rejoined, in the same melancholy music of voice. And Margrave then, leaning his arm upon her shoulder, as he had leaned it on mine, drew her away from the group into a neighboring copse of the flowering eucalypti—mystic trees, never changing the hues of their pale-green leaves, ever shifting the tints of their ash-gray, shedding bark. For some moments I gazed on the two human forms, dimly seen by the glinting moonlight through the gaps in the foliage. Then turning away my eyes, I saw, standing close at my side, a man whom I had not noticed before. His footstep, as it stole to me, had fallen on the sward without sound. His dress, though Oriental, differed from that of his companions, both in shape and color—fitting close to the breast, leaving the arms bare to the elbow, and of a uniform ghastly white, as are the cerements of the grave. His visage was even darker than those of the Syrians or Arabs behind him, and his features were those of a bird of prey: the beak of the eagle, but the eye of the vulture. His cheeks were hollow; the arms, crossed on his breast, were long and fleshless. Yet in that skeleton form there was a something which conveyed the idea of a serpent's suppleness and strength; and as the hungry, watchful eyes met my own startled gaze, I recoiled impulsively with that inward warning of danger which is conveyed to man, as to inferior animals, in the very aspect of the creatures that sting or devour. At my movement the man inclined his head in the submissive Eastern salutation, and spoke in his foreign tongue, softly, humbly, fawningly, to judge by his tone and his gesture.

I moved yet farther away from him with loathing, and now the human thought flashed upon me: was I, in truth, exposed to no danger in trusting myself to the mercy of the weird and remorseless master of those hirelings from the East—seven men in number, two at least of them formidably armed, and docile as bloodhounds to the hunter, who has only to show them their prey? But fear of man like myself is not my weakness; where fear found its way to my heart, it was through the doubts or the fancies in which man like myself disappeared in the attributes, dark and unknown, which we give to a fiend or a specter. And, perhaps, if I could have paused to analyze my own sensations, the very presence of this escort—creatures of flesh and blood—lessened the dread of my incomprehensible tempter. Rather, a hundred times, front and defy those seven Eastern slaves—I, haughty son of the Anglo-Saxon who conquers all races because he fears no odds—than have seen again on the walls of my threshold the luminous, bodiless shadow! Besides: Lilian—Lilian! for one chance of saving her life, however wild and chimerical that chance might be, I would have shrunk not a foot from the march of an army.

Thus reassured and thus resolved, I advanced, with a smile of disdain, to meet Margrave and his veiled companion, as they now came from the moonlit copse.

"Well," I said to him, with an irony that unconsciously mimicked his own, "have you taken advice with your nurse? I assume that the dark form by your side is that of Ayesha!"*

* Margrave's former nurse and attendant.

The woman looked at me from her sable veil, with her steadfast, solemn eyes, and said, in English, though with a foreign accent: "The nurse born in Asia is but wise through her love; the pale son of Europe is wise through his art. The nurse says, 'Forbear!' Do you say, 'Adventure'?"

"Peace!" exclaimed Margrave, stamping his foot on the ground. "I take no counsel from either; it is for me to resolve, for you to obey, and for him to aid. Night is come, and we waste it; move on."

The woman made no reply, nor did I. He took my arm and walked back to the hut. The barbaric escort followed. When we reached the door of the building, Margrave said a few words to the woman and to the litter bearers. They entered the hut with us. Margrave pointed out to the woman his coffer, to the men the fuel stowed in the outhouse. Both were borne away and placed within the litter. Meanwhile I took from the table, on which it was carelessly thrown, the light hatchet that I habitually carried with me in my rambles.

"Do you think that you need that idle weapon?" said Margrave. "Do you fear the good faith of my swarthy attendants?"

"Nay, take the hatchet yourself; its use is to sever the gold from the quartz in which we may find it imbedded, or to clear, as this shovel, which will also be needed, from the slight soil above it, the ore that the mine in the mountain flings forth, as the sea casts its waifs on the sands."

"Give me your hand, fellow laborer!" said Margrave, joyfully. "Ah, there is no faltering terror in this pulse! I was not mistaken in the man. What rests, but the place and the hour?—I shall live, I shall live!"

III

Margrave now entered the litter, and the Veiled Woman drew the black curtains round him. I walked on, as the guide, some yards in advance. The air was still, heavy, and parched with the breath of the Australasian sirocco.

We passed through the meadow lands, studded with slumbering flocks; we followed the branch of the creek, which was linked to its source in the mountains by many a trickling waterfall; we threaded the gloom of stunted, misshapen trees, gnarled with the stringy bark which makes one of the signs of the strata that nourish gold; and at length the moon, now in all her pomp of light, mid-heaven among her subject stars, gleamed through the fissures of the cave, on whose floor lay the relics of antediluvian races, and rested in one flood of silvery splendor upon the hollows of the extinct volcano, with tufts of dank herbage, and wide spaces of paler sward, covering the gold below—gold, the dumb symbol of organized Matter's great mystery, storing in itself, according as Mind, the informer of Matter, can distinguish its uses, evil and good, bane and blessing.

Hitherto the Veiled Woman had remained in the rear, with the white-robed, skeletonlike image that had crept to my side unawares with its noiseless step. Thus, in each winding turn of the difficult path at which the convoy following behind me came into sight, I had seen, first, the two gayly dressed, armed men, next the black, bierlike litter, and last the Black-veiled Woman and the White-robed Skeleton.

But now, as I halted on the tableland, backed by the mountain and fronting the valley, the woman left her companion, passed by the litter and the armed men, and paused by my side, at the mouth of the moonlit cavern.

There for a moment she stood, silent, the procession below mounting upward laboriously and slow; then she turned to me, and her veil was withdrawn.

The face on which I gazed was wondrously beautiful, and severely awful. There was neither youth nor age, but beauty, mature and majestic as that of a marble Demeter.

"Do you believe in that which you seek?" she asked in her foreign, melodious, melancholy accents.

"I have no belief," was my answer. "True science has none. True science questions all things, takes nothing upon credit. It knows but three states of the mind—denial, conviction, and that vast interval between the two which is not belief but suspense of judgment."

The woman let fall her veil, moved from me, and seated herself on a crag above that cleft between mountain and creek, to which, when I had first discovered the gold that the land nourished, the rain from the clouds had given the rushing life of the cataract; but which now, in the drought and the hush of the skies, was but a dead pile of stones.

The litter now ascended the height: its bearers halted; a lean hand tore the curtains aside, and Margrave descended leaning, this time, not on the Black-veiled Woman, but on the White-robed Skeleton.

There, as he stood, the moon shone full on his wasted form; on his face, resolute, cheerful, and proud, despite its hollowed outlines and sicklied hues. He

raised his head, spoke in the language unknown to me, and the armed men and the litter bearers grouped round him, bending low, their eyes fixed on the ground. The Veiled Woman rose slowly and came to his side, motioning away, with a mute sign, the ghastly form on which he leaned, and passing round him silently, instead, her own sustaining arm. Margrave spoke again a few sentences, of which I could not even guess the meaning. When he had concluded, the armed men and the litter bearers came nearer to his feet, knelt down, and kissed his hand. They then rose, and took from the bierlike vehicle the coffer and the fuel. This done, they lifted again the litter, and again, preceded by the armed men, the procession descended down the sloping hillside, down into the valley below.

Margrave now whispered, for some moments, into the ear of the hideous creature who had made way for the Veiled Woman. The grim skeleton bowed his head submissively, and strode noiselessly away through the long grasses—the slender stems, trampled under his stealthy feet, relifting themselves as after a passing wind. And thus he, too, sank out of sight down into the valley below. On the tableland of the hill remained only we three—Margrave, myself, and the Veiled Woman.

She had reseated herself apart, on the gray crag above the dried torrent. He stood at the entrance of the cavern, round the sides of which clustered parasitical plants, with flowers of all colors, some among them opening their petals and exhaling their fragrance only in the hours of night; so that, as his form filled up the jaws of the dull arch, obscuring the moonbeam that strove to pierce the shadows that slept within, it stood now—wan and blighted—as I had seen it first, radiant and joyous, literally "framed in blooms."

IV

"So," said Margrave, turning to me, "under the soil that spreads around us lies the gold which to you and to me is at this moment of no value, except as a guide to its twin-born—the regenerator of life!"

"You have not yet described to me the nature of the substance which we are to explore, nor the process by which the virtues you impute to it are to be extracted."

"Let us first find the gold, and instead of describing the life-amber, so let me call it, I will point it out to your own eyes. As to the process, your share in it is so simple that you will ask me why I seek aid from a chemist. The life-amber, when found, has but to be subjected to heat and fermentation for six hours; it will be placed in a small caldron which that coffer contains, over the fire which that fuel will feed. To give effect to the process, certain alkalies and other ingredients are required; but these are prepared, and mine is the task to commingle them. From your science as chemist I need and ask naught. In you I have sought only the aid of a man."

"If that be so, why, indeed, seek me at all? Why not confide in those swarthy attendants, who doubtless are slaves to your orders?"

"Confide in slaves, when the first task enjoined to them would be to discover, and refrain from purloining gold! Seven such unscrupulous knaves, or even one

such, and I, thus defenseless and feeble! Such is not the work that wise masters confide to fierce slaves. But that is the least of the reasons which exclude them from my choice, and fix my choice of assistant on you. Do you forget what I told you of the danger which the Dervish declared no bribe I could offer could tempt him a second time to brave?"

"I remember now; those words had passed away from my mind."

"And because they had passed away from your mind, I chose you for my comrade. I need a man by whom danger is scorned."

"But in the process of which you tell me I see no possible danger unless the ingredients you mix in your caldron have poisonous fumes."

"It is not that. The ingredients I use are not poisons."

"What other danger, except you dread your own Eastern slaves? But, if so, why lead them to these solitudes; and, if so, why not bid me be armed?"

"The Eastern slaves, fulfilling my commands, wait for my summons, where their eyes cannot see what we do. The danger is of a kind in which the boldest son of the East would be more craven, perhaps, than the daintiest Sybarite of Europe, who would shrink from a panther and laugh at a ghost. In the creed of the Dervish, and of all who adventure into that realm of Nature which is closed to philosophy and open to magic, there are races in the magnitude of space unseen as animalcules in the world of a drop. For the tribes of the drop science has its microscope. Of the host of yon azure Infinite magic gains sight, and through them gains command over fluid conductors that link all the parts of creation. Of these races, some are wholly indifferent to man, some benign to him, and some deadly hostile. In all the regular and prescribed conditions of mortal being, this magic realm seems as blank and tenantless as yon vacant air. But when a seeker of powers beyond the rude functions by which man plies the clockwork that measures his hours, and stops when its chain reaches the end of its coil, strives to pass over those boundaries at which philosophy says, 'Knowledge ends'—then, he is like all other travelers in regions unknown; he must propitiate or brave the tribes that are hostile—must depend for his life on the tribes that are friendly. Though your science discredits the alchemist's dogmas, your learning informs you that all alchemists were not ignorant impostors; yet those whose discoveries prove them to have been the nearest allies to your practical knowledge, ever hint in their mystical works at the reality of that realm which is open to magic—ever hint that some means less familiar than furnace and bellows are essential to him who explores the elixir of life. He who once quaffs that elixir, obtains in his very veins the bright fluid by which he transmits the force of his will to agencies dormant in Nature, to giants unseen in the space. And here, as he passes the boundary which divides his allotted and normal mortality from the regions and races that magic alone can explore, so, here, he breaks down the safeguard between himself and the tribes that are hostile. Is it not ever thus between man and man? Let a race the most gentle and timid and civilized dwell on one side a river or mountain, and another have home in the region beyond, each, if it pass not the intervening barrier, may with each live in peace. But if ambitious adventurers scale the mountain, or cross the river, with design to subdue and enslave the population they boldly invade, then all the invaded arise in wrath and defiance—the neighbors are changed into foes. And therefore this process—by which a simple

though rare material of Nature is made to yield to a mortal the boon of a life which brings, with its glorious resistance to Time, desires and faculties to subject to its service beings that dwell in the earth and the air and the deep—has ever been one of the same peril which an invader must brave when he crosses the bounds of his nation. By this key alone you unlock all the cells of the alchemist's lore; by this alone understand how a labor, which a chemist's crudest apprentice could perform, has baffled the giant fathers of all your dwarfed children of science. Nature, that stores this priceless boon, seems to shrink from conceding it to man—the invisible tribes that abhor him oppose themselves to the gain that might give them a master. The duller of those who were the life-seekers of old would have told you how some chance, trivial, unlooked-for, foiled their grand hope at the very point of fruition; some doltish mistake, some improvident oversight, a defect in the sulphur, a wild overflow in the quicksilver, or a flaw in the bellows, or a pupil who failed to replenish the fuel, by falling asleep by the furnace. The invisible foes seldom vouchsafe to make themselves visible where they can frustrate the bungler as they mock at his toils from their ambush. But the mightier adventurers, equally foiled in despite of their patience and skill, would have said, 'Not with us rests the fault; we neglected no caution, we failed from no oversight. But out from the caldron dread faces arose, and the specters or demons dismayed and baffled us.' Such, then, is the danger which seems so appalling to a son of the East, as it seemed to a seer in the dark age of Europe. But we can deride all its threats, you and I. For myself, I own frankly I take all the safety that the charms and resources of magic bestow. You, for your safety, have the cultured and disciplined reason which reduces all fantasies to nervous impressions; and I rely on the courage of one who has questioned, unquailing, the Luminous Shadow, and wrested from the hand of the magician himself the wand which concentrated the wonders of will!"

To this strange and long discourse I listened without interruption, and now quietly answered:

"I do not merit the trust you affect in my courage; but I am now on my guard against the cheats of the fancy, and the fumes of a vapor can scarcely bewilder the brain in the open air of this mountain land. I believe in no races like those which you tell me lie viewless in space, as do gases. I believe not in magic; I ask not its aids, and I dread not its terrors. For the rest, I am confident of one mournful courage—the courage that comes from despair. I submit to your guidance, whatever it be, as a sufferer whom colleges doom to the grave submits to the quack who says, 'Take my specific and live!' My life is naught in itself; my life lives in another. You and I are both brave from despair; you would turn death from yourself—I would turn death from one I love more than myself. Both know how little aid we can win from the colleges, and both, therefore, turn to the promises most audaciously cheering. Dervish or magician, alchemist or phantom, what care you and I? And if they fail us, what then? They cannot fail us more than the colleges do!"

The gold has been gained with an easy labor. I knew where to seek for it, whether under the turf or in the bed of the creek. But Margrave's eyes, hungrily gazing round every spot from which the ore was disburied, could not detect the substance of which he alone knew the outward appearance. I had begun to believe that, even in the description given to him of this material, he had been credulously duped, and that no such material existed, when, coming back from the bed of the watercourse, I saw a faint, yellow gleam amidst the roots of a giant parasite plant, the leaves and blossoms of which climbed up the sides of the cave with its antediluvian relics. The gleam was the gleam of gold, and on removing the loose earth round the roots of the plant, we came on— No, I will not, I dare not, describe it. The gold digger would cast it aside; the naturalist would pause not to heed it; and did I describe it, and chemistry deign to subject it to analysis, could chemistry alone detach or discover its boasted virtues?

Its particles, indeed, are very minute, not seeming readily to crystallize with each other; each in itself of uniform shape and size, spherical as the egg which contains the germ of life, and small as the egg from which the life of an insect may quicken.

But Margrave's keen eye caught sight of the atoms upcast by the light of the moon. He exclaimed to me, "Found! I shall live!" And then, as he gathered up the grains with tremulous hands, he called out to the Veiled Woman, hitherto still seated motionless on the crag. At his word she rose and went to the place hard by, where the fuel was piled, busying herself there. I had no leisure to heed her. I continued my search in the soft and yielding soil that time and the decay of vegetable life had accumulated over the pre-Adamite strata on which the arch of the cave rested its mighty keystone.

When we had collected of these particles about thrice as much as a man might hold in his hand, we seemed to have exhausted their bed. We continued still to find gold, but no more of the delicate substance to which, in our sight, gold was as dross.

"Enough," then said Margrave, reluctantly desisting. "What we have gained already will suffice for a life thrice as long as legend attributes to Haroun. I shall live—I shall live through the centuries."

"Forget not that I claim my share."

"Your share—yours! True—your half of my life! It is true." He paused with a low, ironical, malignant laugh, and then added, as he rose and turned away, "But the work is yet to be done."

VI

While we had thus labored and found, Ayesha had placed the fuel where the moonlight fell fullest on the sward of the tableland—a part of it already piled as for a fire, the rest of it heaped confusedly close at hand; and by the pile she had placed the coffer. And, there she stood, her arms folded under her mantle, her dark image seeming darker still as the moonlight whitened all the ground from which the image rose motionless. Margrave opened his coffer, the Veiled Woman

did not aid him, and I watched in silence, while he as silently made his weird and wizard-like preparations.

VII

On the ground a wide circle was traced by a small rod, tipped apparently with sponge saturated with some combustible naphtha-like fluid, so that a pale, lambent flame followed the course of the rod as Margrave guided it, burning up the herbage over which it played, and leaving a distinct ring, like that which, in our lovely native fable talk, we call the "Fairy's ring," but yet more visible because marked in phosphorescent light. On the ring thus formed were placed twelve small lamps, fed with the fluid from the same vessel, and lighted by the same rod. The light emitted by the lamps was more vivid and brilliant than that which circled round the ring.

Within the circumference, and immediately round the woodpile, Margrave traced certain geometrical figures, in which—not without a shudder, that I overcame at once by a strong effort of will in murmuring to myself the name of "Lilian"—I recognized the interlaced triangles which my own hand, in the spell enforced on a sleepwalker, had described on the floor of the wizard's pavilion. The figures were traced like the circle, in flame, and at the point of each triangle (four in number) was placed a lamp, brilliant as those on the ring. This task performed, the caldron, based on an iron tripod, was placed on the woodpile. And then the woman, before inactive and unheeding, slowly advanced, knelt by the pile and lighted it. The dry wood crackled and the flame burst forth, licking the rims of the caldron with tongues of fire.

Margrave flung into the caldron the particles we had collected, poured over them first a liquid, colorless as water, from the largest of the vessels drawn from his coffer, and then, more sparingly, drops from small crystal phials, like the phials I had seen in the hand of Philip Derval.

Having surmounted my first impulse of awe, I watched these proceedings, curious yet disdainful, as one who watches the mummeries of an enchanter on the stage.

"If," thought I, "these are but artful devices to inebriate and fool my own imagination, my imagination is on its guard, and reason shall not, this time, sleep at her post!"

"And now," said Margrave, "I consign to you the easy task by which you are to merit your share of the elixir. It is my task to feed and replenish the caldron; it is Ayesha's to feed the fire, which must not for a moment relax in its measured and steady heat. Your task is the lightest of all: it is but to renew from this vessel the fluid that burns in the lamps, and on the ring. Observe, the contents of the vessel must be thriftily husbanded; there is enough, but not more than enough, to sustain the light in the lamps, on the lines traced round the caldron, and on the farther ring, for six hours. The compounds dissolved in this fluid are scarce—only obtainable in the East, and even in the East months might have passed before I could have increased my supply. I had no months to waste. Replenish, then, the

light only when it begins to flicker or fade. Take heed, above all, that no part of the outer ring—no, not an inch—and no lamp of the twelve, that are to its zodiac like stars, fade for one moment in darkness."

I took the crystal vessel from his hand.

"The vessel is small," said I, "and what is yet left of its contents is but scanty; whether its drops suffice to replenish the lights I cannot guess—I can but obey your instructions. But, more important by far than the light to the lamps and the circle, which in Asia or Africa might scare away the wild beasts unknown to this land—more important than light to a lamp is the strength to your frame, weak magician! What will support you through six weary hours of night watch?"

"Hope," answered Margrave, with a ray of his old dazzling style. "Hope! I shall live—I shall live through the centuries!"

VIII

One hour passed away; the fagots under the caldron burned clear in the sullen, sultry air. The materials within began to seethe, and their color, at first dull and turbid, changed into a pale-rose hue; from time to time the Veiled Woman replenished the fire, after she had done so reseating herself close by the pyre, with her head bowed over her knees, and her face hid under her veil.

The lights in the lamps and along the ring and the triangles now began to pale. I resupplied their nutriment from the crystal vessel. As yet nothing strange startled my eye or my ear beyond the rim of the circle—nothing audible, save, at a distance, the musical wheel-like click of the locusts, and, farther still, in the forest, the howl of the wild dogs that never bark; nothing visible, but the trees and the mountain range girding the plains silvered by the moon, and the arch of the cavern, the flush of wild blooms on its sides, and the gleam of dry bones on its floor, where the moonlight shot into the gloom.

The second hour passed like the first. I had taken my stand by the side of Margrave, watching with him the process at work in the caldron, when I felt the ground slightly vibrate beneath my feet, and looking up, it seemed as if all the plains beyond the circle were heaving like the swell of the sea, and as if in the air itself there was a perceptible tremor.

I placed my hand on Margrave's shoulder and whispered, "To me earth and air seem to vibrate. Do they seem to vibrate to you?"

"I know not, I care not," he answered impetuously. "The essence is bursting the shell that confined it. Here are my air and my earth! Trouble me not. Look to the circle—feed the lamps if they fail!"

I passed by the Veiled Woman as I walked toward a place in the ring in which the flame was waning dim; and I whispered to her the same question which I had whispered to Margrave. She looked slowly around and answered, "So is it before the Invisible make themselves visible! Did I not bid him forbear?" Her head again drooped on her breast, and her watch was again fixed on the fire.

I advanced to the circle and stooped to replenish the light where it waned. As I did so, on my arm, which stretched somewhat beyond the line of the ring, I felt a

shock like that of electricity. The arm fell to my side numbed and nerveless, and from my hand dropped, but within the ring, the vessel that contained the fluid. Recovering my surprise or my stun, hastily with the other hand I caught up the vessel, but some of the scanty liquid was already spilled on the sward; and I saw with a thrill of dismay, that contrasted indeed the tranquil indifference with which I had first undertaken my charge, how small a supply was now left.

I went back to Margrave, and told him of the shock, and of its consequence in the waste of the liquid.

"Beware," said he, that not a motion of the arm, not an inch of the foot, pass the verge of the ring; and if the fluid be thus unhappily stinted, reserve all that is left for the protecting circle and the twelve outer lamps! See how the Grand Work advances, how the hues in the caldron are glowing blood-red through the film on the surface!

And now four hours of the six were gone; my arm had gradually recovered its strength. Neither the ring nor the lamps had again required replenishing; perhaps their light was exhausted less quickly, as it was no longer to be exposed to the rays of the intense Australian moon. Clouds had gathered over the sky, and though the moon gleamed at times in the gaps that they left in blue air, her beam was more hazy and dulled. The locusts no longer were heard in the grass, nor the howl of the dogs in the forest. Out of the circle, the stillness was profound.

And about this time I saw distinctly in the distance a vast Eye. It drew nearer and nearer, seeming to move from the ground at the height of some lofty giant. Its gaze riveted mine; my blood curdled in the blaze from its angry ball; and now as it advanced larger and larger, other Eyes, as if of giants in its train, grew out from the space in its rear—numbers on numbers, like the spearheads of some Eastern army, seen afar by pale warders of battlements doomed to the dust. My voice long refused an utterance to my awe; at length it burst forth shrill and loud:

"Look, look! Those terrible Eyes! Legions on legions. And hark! that tramp of numberless feet; THEY are not seen, but the hollows of earth echo the sound of their march!"

Margrave, more than ever intent on the caldron, in which, from time to time, he kept dropping powders or essences drawn forth from his coffer, looked up, defyingly, fiercely:

"Ye come," he said in a low mutter, his once mighty voice sounding hollow and laboring, but fearless and firm—"ye come—not to conquer, vain rebels!—ye whose dark chief I struck down at my feet in the tomb where my spell had raised up the ghost of your first human master, the Chaldee! Earth and air have their armies still faithful to me, and still I remember the war song that summons them up to confront you! Ayesha, Ayesha! recall the wild troth that we pledged among the roses; recall the dread bond by which we united our sway over hosts that yet own thee as queen, though my scepter is broken, my diadem reft from my brows!"

The Veiled Woman rose at this adjuration. Her veil now was withdrawn, and the blaze of the fire between Margrave and herself flushed, as with the rosy bloom of youth, the grand beauty of her softened face. It was seen, detached, as it were, from her dark-mantled form; seen through the mist of the vapors which rose from the caldron, framing it round like the clouds that are yieldingly pierced by the light of the evening star.

Through the haze of the vapor came her voice, more musical, more plaintive than I had heard it before, but far softer, more tender: still in her foreign tongue; the words unknown to me, and yet their sense, perhaps, made intelligible by the love, which has one common language and one common look to all who have loved—the love unmistakably heard in the loving tone, unmistakably seen in the loving face.

A moment or so more and she had come round from the opposite side of the fire pile, and bending over Margrave's upturned brow, kissed it quietly, solemnly; and then her countenance grew fierce, her crest rose erect: it was the lioness protecting her young. She stretched forth her arm from the black mantle, athwart the pale front that now again bent over the caldron—stretched it toward the haunted and hollow-sounding space beyond, in the gesture of one whose right hand has the sway of the scepter. And then her voice stole on the air in the music of a chant, not loud yet far-reaching; so thrilling, so sweet and yet so solemn that I could at once comprehend how legend united of old the spell of enchantment with the power of song. All that I recalled of the effects which, in the former time, Margrave's strange chants had produced on the ear that they ravished and the thoughts they confused, was but as the wild bird's imitative carol, compared to the depth and the art and the soul of the singer, whose voice seemed endowed with a charm to inthrall all the tribes of creation, though the language it used for that charm might to them, as to me, be unknown. As the song ceased, I heard from behind sounds like those I had heard in the spaces before me—the tramp of invisible feet, the whirl of invisible wings, as if armies were marching to aid against armies in march to destroy.

"Look not in front nor around," said Ayesha. "Look, like him, on the caldron below. The circle and the lamps are yet bright; I will tell you when the light again fails."

I dropped my eyes on the caldron.

"See," whispered Margrave, "the sparkles at last begin to arise, and the rose hues to deepen—signs that we near the last process."

IX

The fifth hour had passed away, when Ayesha said to me, "Lo! the circle is fading; the lamps grow dim. Look now without fear on the space beyond; the eyes that appalled thee are again lost in air, as lightnings that fleet back into cloud."

I looked up, and the specters had vanished. The sky was tinged with sulphurous hues, the red and the black intermixed. I replenished the lamps and the ring in front, thriftily, heedfully; but when I came to the sixth lamp, not a drop in the vessel that fed them was left. In a vague dismay, I now looked round the half of the wide circle in rear of the two bended figures intent on the caldron. All along that disk the light was already broken, here and there flickering up, here and there dying down; the six lamps in that half of the circle still twinkled, but faintly, as stars shrinking fast from the dawn of day. But it was not the fading shine in that half of the magical ring which daunted my eye and quickened with

terror the pulse of my heart; the Bush-land beyond was on fire. From the background of the forest rose the flame and the smoke—the smoke, there, still half smothering the flame. But along the width of the grasses and herbage, between the verge of the forest and the bed of the water creek just below the raised platform from which I beheld the dread conflagration, the fire was advancing—wave upon wave, clear and red against the columns of rock behind; as the rush of a flood through the mists of some Alp crowned with lightnings.

Roused from my stun at the first sight of a danger not foreseen by the mind I had steeled against far rarer portents of Nature, I cared no more for the lamps and the circle. Hurrying back to Ayesha I exclaimed: "The phantoms have gone from the spaces in front; but what incantation or spell can arrest the red march of the foe speeding on in the rear! While we gazed on the caldron of life, behind us, unheeded, behold the Destroyer!"

Ayesha looked and made no reply, but, as by involuntary instinct, bowed her majestic head, then rearing it erect, placed herself yet more immediately before the wasted form of the young magician (he still, bending over the caldron, and hearing me not in the absorption and hope of his watch)—placed herself before him, as the bird whose first care is her fledgling.

As we two there stood, fronting the deluge of fire, we heard Margrave behind us, murmuring low, "See the bubbles of light, how they sparkle and dance—I shall live, I shall live!" And his words scarcely died in our ears before, crash upon crash, came the fall of the age-long trees in the forest, and nearer, all near us, through the blazing grasses, the hiss of the serpents, the scream of the birds, and the bellow and tramp of the herds plunging wild through the billowy red of their pastures.

Ayesha now wound her arms around Margrave, and wrenched him, reluctant and struggling, from his watch over the seething caldron. In rebuke of his angry exclamations, she pointed to the march of the fire, spoke in sorrowful tones a few words in her own language, and then, appealing to me in English, said:

"I tell him that, here, the Spirits who oppose us have summoned a foe that is deaf to my voice, and—"

"And," exclaimed Margrave, no longer with gasp and effort, but with the swell of a voice which drowned all the discords of terror and of agony sent forth from the Phlegethon burning below—"and this witch, whom I trusted, is a vile slave and impostor, more desiring my death than my life. She thinks that in life I should scorn and forsake her, that in death I should die in her arms! Sorceress, avaunt! Art thou useless and powerless now when I need thee most? Go! Let the world be one funeral pyre! What to ME is the world? My world is my life! Thou knowest that my last hope is here—that all the strength left me this night will die down, like the lamps in the circle, unless the elixir restore it. Bold friend, spurn that sorceress away. Hours yet ere those flames can assail us! A few minutes more, and life to your Lilian and me!"

Thus having said, Margrave turned from us, and cast into the caldron the last essence yet left in his empty coffer.

Ayesha silently drew her black veil over her face, and turned, with the being she loved, from the terror he scorned, to share in the hope that he cherished.

Thus left alone, with my reason disinthralled, disenchanting, I surveyed more calmly the extent of the actual peril with which we were threatened, and the peril seemed less, so surveyed.

It is true all the Bush-land behind, almost up to the bed of the creek, was on fire; but the grasses, through which the flame spread so rapidly, ceased at the opposite marge of the creek. Watery pools were still, at intervals, left in the bed of the creek, shining tremulous, like waves of fire, in the glare reflected from the burning land; and even where the water failed, the stony course of the exhausted rivulet was a barrier against the march of the conflagration. Thus, unless the wind, now still, should rise, and waft some sparks to the parched combustible herbage immediately around us, we were saved from the fire, and our work might yet be achieved.

I whispered to Ayesha the conclusion to which I came.

"Thinkest thou," she answered without raising her mournful head, "that the Agencies of Nature are the movements of chance? The Spirits I invoked to his aid are leagued with the hosts that assail. A mightier than I am has doomed him!"

Scarcely had she uttered these words before Margrave exclaimed, "Behold how the Rose of the alchemist's dream enlarges its blooms from the folds of its petals! I shall live, I shall live!"

I looked, and the liquid which glowed in the caldron had now taken a splendor that mocked all comparisons borrowed from the luster of gems. In its prevalent color it had, indeed, the dazzle and flash of the ruby; but out from the mass of the molten red, broke coruscations of all prismatic hues, shooting, shifting, in a play that made the wavelets themselves seem living things, sensible of their joy. No longer was there scum or film upon the surface; only ever and anon a light, rosy vapor floating up, and quick lost in the haggard, heavy, sulphurous air, hot with the conflagration rushing toward us from behind. And these coruscations formed, on the surface of the molten ruby, literally the shape of a rose, its leaves made distinct in their outlines by sparks of emerald and diamond and sapphire.

Even while gazing on this animated liquid luster, a buoyant delight seemed infused into my senses; all terrors conceived before were annulled; the phantoms, whose armies had filled the wide spaces in front, were forgotten; the crash of the forest behind was unheard. In the reflection of that glory, Margrave's wan cheek seemed already restored to the radiance it wore when I saw it first in the framework of blooms.

As I gazed, thus enchanted, a cold hand touched my own.

"Hush!" whispered Ayesha, from the black veil, against which the rays of the caldron fell blunt, and absorbed into Dark. "Behind us, the light of the circle is extinct; but there, we are guarded from all save the brutal and soulless destroyers. But, before!— but, before!—see, two of the lamps have died out!—see the blank of the gap in the ring! Guard that breach—there the demons will enter."

"Not a drop is there left in this vessel by which to replenish the lamps on the ring."

"Advance, then; thou hast still the light of the soul, and the demons may recoil before a soul that is dauntless and guiltless. If not, Three are lost!—as it is, One is doomed."

Thus adjured, silently, involuntarily, I passed from the Veiled Woman's side, over the sear lines on the turf which had been traced by the triangles of light long since extinguished, and toward the verge of the circle. As I advanced, overhead rushed a dark cloud of wings—birds dislodged from the forest on fire, and screaming, in dissonant terror, as they flew toward the farthest mountains; close by my feet hissed and glided the snakes, driven forth from their blazing coverts, and glancing through the ring, unscared by its waning lamps; all undulating by me, bright-eyed, and hissing, all made innocuous by fear—even the terrible Death-adder, which I trampled on as I halted at the verge of the circle, did not turn to bite, but crept harmless away. I halted at the gap between the two dead lamps, and bowed my head to look again into the crystal vessel. Were there, indeed, no lingering drops yet left, if but to recruit the lamps for some priceless minutes more? As I thus stood, right into the gap between the two dead lamps strode a gigantic Foot. All the rest of the form was unseen; only, as volume after volume of smoke poured on from the burning land behind, it seemed as if one great column of vapor, eddying round, settled itself aloft from the circle, and that out from that column strode the giant Foot. And, as strode the Foot, so with it came, like the sound of its tread, a roll of muttered thunder.

I recoiled, with a cry that rang loud through the lurid air.

"Courage!" said the voice of Ayesha. "Trembling soul, yield not an inch to the demon!"

At the charm, the wonderful charm, in the tone of the Veiled Woman's voice, my will seemed to take a force more sublime than its own. I folded my arms on my breast, and stood as if rooted to the spot, confronting the column of smoke and the stride of the giant Foot. And the Foot halted, mute.

Again, in the momentary hush of that suspense, I heard a voice—it was Margrave's.

"The last hour expires—the work is accomplished! Come! come! Aid me to take the caldron from the fire; and, quick!—or a drop may be wasted in vapor—the Elixir of Life from the caldron!"

At that cry I receded, and the Foot advanced.

And at that moment, suddenly, unawares, from behind, I was stricken down. Over me, as I lay, swept a whirlwind of trampling hoofs and glancing horns. The herds, in their flight from the burning pastures, had rushed over the bed of the water course, scaled the slopes of the banks. Snorting and bellowing, they plunged their blind way to the mountains. One cry alone, more wild than their own savage blare, pierced the reek through which the Brute Hurricane swept. At that cry of wrath and despair I struggled to rise, again dashed to earth by the hoofs and the horns. But was it the dreamlike deceit of my reeling senses, or did I see that giant Foot stride past through the close-serried ranks of the maddening herds? Did I hear, distinct through all the huge uproar of animal terror, the roll of low thunder which followed the stride of that Foot?

When my sense had recovered its shock, and my eyes looked dizzily round, the charge of the beasts had swept by; and of all the wild tribes which had invaded the magical circle, the only lingerer was the brown Death-adder, coiled close by the spot where my head had rested. Beside the extinguished lamps which the hoofs had confusedly scattered, the fire, arrested by the water course, had consumed the grasses that fed it, and there the plains stretched black and desert as the Phlegraean Field of the Poet's Hell. But the fire still raged in the forest beyond—white flames, soaring up from the trunks of the tallest trees, and forming, through the sullen dark of the smoke reck, innumerable pillars of fire, like the halls in the city of fiends.

Gathering myself up, I turned my eyes from the terrible pomp of the lurid forest, and looked fearfully down on the hoof-trampled sward for my two companions.

I saw the dark image of Ayesha still seated, still bending, as I had seen it last. I saw a pale hand feebly grasping the rim of the magical caldron, which lay, hurled down from its tripod by the rush of the beasts, yards away from the dim, fading embers of the scattered wood pyre. I saw the faint writhings of a frail, wasted frame, over which the Veiled Woman was bending. I saw, as I moved with bruised limbs to the place, close by the lips of the dying magician, the flash of the rubylike essence spilled on the sward, and, meteor-like, sparkling up from the torn tufts of herbage.

I now reached Margrave's side. Bending over him as the Veiled Woman bent, and as I sought gently to raise him, he turned his face, fiercely faltering out, "Touch me not, rob me not! YOU share with me! Never, never! These glorious drops are all mine! Die all else! I will live, I will live!" Writhing himself from my pitying arms, he plunged his face amidst the beautiful, playful flame of the essence, as if to lap the elixir with lips scorched away from its intolerable burning. Suddenly, with a low shriek, he fell back, his face upturned to mine, and on that face unmistakably reigned Death.

Then Ayesha tenderly, silently, drew the young head to her lap, and it vanished from my sight behind her black veil.

I knelt beside her, murmuring some trite words of comfort; but she heeded me not, rocking herself to and fro as the mother who cradles a child to sleep. Soon the fast-flickering sparkles of the lost elixir died out on the grass; and with their last sportive diamond-like tremble of light, up, in all the suddenness of Australian day, rose the sun, lifting himself royally above the mountain tops, and fronting the meaner blaze of the forest as a young king fronts his rebels. And as there, where the bush fires had ravaged, all was a desert, so there, where their fury had not spread, all was a garden. Afar, at the foot of the mountains, the fugitive herds were grazing; the cranes, flocking back to the pools, renewed the strange grace of their gambols; and the great kingfisher, whose laugh, half in mirth, half in mockery, leads the choir that welcome the morn—which in Europe is night—alighted bold on the roof of the cavern, whose floors were still white with the bones of races, extinct before—so helpless through instincts, so royal through Soul—rose MAN!

But there, on the ground where the dazzling elixir had wasted its virtues—there the herbage already had a freshness of verdure which, amid the duller sward round it, was like an oasis of green in a desert. And, there, wild flowers, whose chill hues the eye would have scarcely distinguished the day before, now glittered

forth in blooms of unfamiliar beauty. Toward that spot were attracted myriads of happy insects, whose hum of intense joy was musically loud. But the form of the life-seeking sorcerer lay rigid and stark; blind to the bloom of the wild flowers, deaf to the glee of the insects—one hand still resting heavily on the rim of the emptied caldron, and the face still hid behind the Black Veil. What! the wondrous elixir, sought with such hope and well-nigh achieved through such dread, fleeting back to the earth from which its material was drawn to give bloom, indeed—but to herbs; joy indeed—but to insects!

And now, in the flash of the sun, slowly wound up the slopes that led to the circle, the same barbaric procession which had sunk into the valley under the ray of the moon. The armed men came first, stalwart and tall, their vests brave with crimson and golden lace, their weapons gayly gleaming with holiday silver. After them, the Black Litter. As they came to the place, Ayesha, not raising her head, spoke to them in her own Eastern tongue. A wail was her answer. The armed men bounded forward, and the bearers left the litter.

All gathered round the dead form with the face concealed under the Black Veil; all knelt, and all wept. Far in the distance, at the foot of the blue mountains, a crowd of the savage natives had risen up as if from the earth; they stood motionless leaning on their clubs and spears, and looking toward the spot on which we were—strangely thus brought into the landscape, as if they too, the wild dwellers on the verge which Humanity guards from the Brute, were among the mourners for the mysterious Child of mysterious Nature! And still, in the herbage, hummed the small insects, and still, from the cavern, laughed the great kingfisher. I said to Ayesha, "Farewell! your love mourns the dead, mine calls me to the living. You are now with your own people, they may console you—say if I can assist."

"There is no consolation for me! What mourner can be consoled if the dead die forever? Nothing for him is left but a grave; that grave shall be in the land where the song of Ayesha first lulled him to sleep. Thou assist ME—thou, the wise man of Europe! From me ask assistance. What road wilt thou take to thy home?"

"There is but one road known to me through the maze of the solitude—that which we took to this upland."

"On that road Death lurks, and awaits thee! Blind dupe, couldst thou think that if the grand secret of life had been won, he whose head rests on my lap would have yielded thee one petty drop of the essence which had filched from his store of life but a moment? Me, who so loved and so cherished him—me he would have doomed to the pitiless cord of my servant, the Strangler, if my death could have lengthened a hairbreadth the span of his being. But what matters to me his crime or his madness? I loved him, I loved him!"

She bowed her veiled head lower and lower; perhaps under the veil her lips kissed the lips of the dead. Then she said whisperingly:

"Juma the Strangler, whose word never failed to his master, whose prey never slipped from his snare, waits thy step on the road to thy home! But thy death cannot now profit the dead, the beloved. And thou hast had pity for him who took but thine aid to design thy destruction. His life is lost, thine is saved!"

She spoke no more in the tongue that I could interpret. She spoke, in the language unknown, a few murmured words to her swarthy attendants; then the

armed men, still weeping, rose, and made a dumb sign to me to go with them. I understood by the sign that Ayesha had told them to guard me on my way; but she gave no reply to my parting thanks.

XI

I descended into the valley; the armed men followed. The path, on that side of the water course not reached by the flames, wound through meadows still green, or amidst groves still unscathed. As a turning in the way brought in front of my sight the place I had left behind, I beheld the black litter creeping down the descent, with its curtains closed, and the Veiled Woman walking by its side. But soon the funeral procession was lost to my eyes, and the thoughts that it roused were erased. The waves in man's brain are like those of the sea, rushing on, rushing over the wrecks of the vessels that rode on their surface, to sink, after storm, in their deeps. One thought cast forth into the future now mastered all in the past: "Was Lilian living still?" Absorbed in the gloom of that thought, hurried on by the goad that my heart, in its tortured impatience, gave to my footstep, I outstripped the slow stride of the armed men, and, midway between the place I had left and the home which I sped to, came, far in advance of my guards, into the thicket in which the Bushmen had started up in my path on the night that Lilian had watched for my coming. The earth at my feet was rife with creeping plants and many-colored flowers, the sky overhead was half hid by motionless pines. Suddenly, whether crawling out from the herbage or dropping down from the trees, by my side stood the white-robed and skeleton form—Ayesha's attendant the Strangler.

I sprang from him shuddering, then halted and faced him. The hideous creature crept toward me, cringing and fawning, making signs of humble goodwill and servile obeisance. Again I recoiled—wrathfully, loathingly, turned my face homeward, and fled on. I thought I had baffled his chase, when, just at the mouth of the thicket, he dropped from a bough in my path close behind me. Before I could turn, some dark muffling substance fell between my sight and the sun, and I felt a fierce strain at my throat. But the words of Ayesha had warned me; with one rapid hand I seized the noose before it could tighten too closely, with the other I tore the bandage away from my eyes, and, wheeling round on the dastardly foe, struck him down with one spurn of my foot. His hand, as he fell, relaxed its hold on the noose; I freed my throat from the knot, and sprang from the copse into the broad sunlit plain. I saw no more of the armed men or the Strangler. Panting and breathless, I paused at last before the fence, fragrant with blossoms, that divided my home from the solitude.

The windows of Lilian's room were darkened; all within the house seemed still.

Darkened and silenced home, with the light and sounds of the jocund day all around it. Was there yet hope in the Universe for me? All to which I had trusted Hope had broken down; the anchors I had forged for her hold in the beds of the ocean, her stay from the drifts of the storm, had snapped like the reeds which pierce the side that leans on the barb of their points, and confides in the strength

of their stems. No hope in the baffled resources of recognized knowledge! No hope in the daring adventures of Mind into regions unknown; vain alike the calm lore of the practiced physician, and the magical arts of the fated Enchanter! I had fled from the commonplace teachings of Nature, to explore in her Shadowland marvels at variance with reason. Made brave by the grandeur of love, I had opposed without quailing the stride of the Demon, and my hope, when fruition seemed nearest, had been trodden into dust by the hoofs of the beast! And yet, all the while, I had scorned, as a dream, more wild than the word of a sorcerer, the hope that the old man and the child, the wise and the ignorant, took from their souls as inborn. Man and fiend had alike failed a mind, not ignoble, not skill-less, not abjectly craven; alike failed a heart not feeble and selfish, not dead to the hero's devotion, willing to shed every drop of its blood for a something more dear than an animal's life for itself! What remained—what remained for man's hope?—man's mind and man's heart thus exhausting their all with no other result but despair! What remained but the mystery of mysteries, so clear to the sunrise of childhood, the sunset of age, only dimmed by the clouds which collect round the noon of our manhood? Where yet was Hope found? In the soul; in its every-day impulse to supplicate comfort and light, from the Giver of soul, wherever the heart is afflicted, the mind is obscured.

Then the words of Ayesha rushed over me: "What mourner can be consoled, if the dead die forever?" Through every pulse of my frame throbbled that dread question; all Nature around seemed to murmur it. And suddenly, as by a flash from heaven, the grand truth in Faber's grand reasoning shone on me, and lighted up all, within and without. Man alone, of all earthly creatures, asks, "Can the dead die forever?" and the instinct that urges the question is God's answer to man. No instinct is given in vain.

And born with the instinct of soul is the instinct that leads the soul from the seen to the unseen, from time to eternity, from the torrent that foams toward the Ocean of Death, to the source of its stream, far aloft from the Ocean.

"Know thyself," said the Pythian of old. "That precept descended from Heaven." Know thyself! Is that maxim wise? If so, know thy soul. But never yet did man come to the thorough conviction of soul but what he acknowledged the sovereign necessity of prayer. In my awe, in my rapture, all my thoughts seemed enlarged and illumed and exalted. I prayed—all my soul seemed one prayer. All my past, with its pride and presumption and folly, grew distinct as the form of a penitent, kneeling for pardon before setting forth on the pilgrimage vowed to a shrine. And, sure now, in the deeps of a soul first revealed to myself, that the Dead do not die forever, my human love soared beyond its brief trial of terror and sorrow. Daring not to ask from Heaven's wisdom that Lilian, for my sake, might not yet pass away from the earth, I prayed that my soul might be fitted to bear with submission whatever my Maker might ordain. And if surviving her—without whom no beam from yon material sun could ever warm into joy a morrow in human life—so to guide my steps that they might rejoin her at last, and in rejoining, regain forever!

How trivial now became the weird riddle, that, a little while before, had been clothed in so solemn an awe! What mattered it to the vast interests involved in the clear recognition of Soul and Hereafter, whether or not my bodily sense, for a moment, obscured the face of the Nature I should one day behold as a spirit?

Doubtless the sights and the sounds which had haunted the last gloomy night, the calm reason of Faber would strip of their magical seemings; the Eyes in the space and the Foot in the circle might be those of no terrible Demons, but of the wild's savage children whom I had seen, halting, curious and mute, in the light of the morning. The tremor of the ground (if not, as heretofore, explicable by the illusory impression of my own treacherous senses) might be but the natural effect of elements struggling yet under a soil unmistakably charred by volcanoes. The luminous atoms dissolved in the caldron might as little be fraught with a vital elixir as are the splendors of naphtha or phosphor. As it was, the weird rite had no magic result. The magician was not rent limb from limb by the fiends. By causes as natural as ever extinguished life's spark in the frail lamp of clay, he had died out of sight—under the black veil.

What mattered henceforth to Faith, in its far grander questions and answers, whether Reason, in Faber, or Fancy, in me, supplied the more probable guess at a hieroglyph which, if construed aright, was but a word of small mark in the mystical language of Nature? If all the arts of enchantment recorded by Fable were attested by facts which Sages were forced to acknowledge, Sages would sooner or later find some cause for such portents—not supernatural. But what Sage, without cause supernatural, both without and within him, can guess at the wonders he views in the growth of a blade of grass, or the tints on an insect's wing? Whatever art Man can achieve in his progress through time, Man's reason, in time, can suffice to explain. But the wonders of God? These belong to the Infinite; and these, O Immortal! will but develop new wonder on wonder, though thy sight be a spirit's, and thy leisure to track and to solve an eternity.

As I raised my face from my clasped hands, my eyes fell full upon a form standing in the open doorway. There, where on the night in which Lilian's long struggle for reason and life had begun, the Luminous Shadow had been beheld in the doubtful light of a dying moon and a yet hazy dawn; there, on the threshold, gathering round her bright locks the aureole of the glorious sun, stood Amy, the blessed child! And as I gazed, drawing nearer and nearer to the silenced house, and that Image of Peace on its threshold, I felt that Hope met me at the door—Hope in the child's steadfast eyes, Hope in the child's welcoming smile!

"I was at watch for you," whispered Amy. "All is well."

"She lives still—she lives! Thank God, thank God!"

"She lives—she will recover!" said another voice, as my head sunk on Faber's shoulder. "For some hours in the night her sleep was disturbed, convulsed. I feared, then, the worst. Suddenly, just before the dawn, she called out aloud, still in sleep:

"The cold and dark shadow has passed away from me and from Allen— passed away from us both forever!"

"And from that moment the fever left her; the breathing became soft, the pulse steady, and the color stole gradually back to her cheek. The crisis is past. Nature's benign Disposer has permitted Nature to restore your life's gentle partner, heart to heart, mind to mind—"

"And soul to soul," I cried in my solemn joy. "Above as below, soul to soul!" Then, at a sign from Faber, the child took me by the hand and led me up the stairs into Lilian's room.

Again those dear arms closed around me in wifelike and holy love, and those true lips kissed away my tears—even as now, at the distance of years from that happy morn, while I write the last words of this Strange Story, the same faithful arms close around me, the same tender lips kiss away my tears.
