The Secret of the Court

by Frank Frankfort Moore, 1855-1931

Illustrations by G. H. Edwards

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Illustrations

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Illustration:
He had his fingers upon the loose flesh of his throat

PART I

Chapter I

THE sun was setting among the rocks of El Ghebir, giving them for some minutes the appearance of the ragged-edged crater of a volcano. Masses of red fire and tongues of orange flame blazed upward with wild unaccountable flashes, making a lurid back ground against which the irregular outlines of the rocks were sharply cut, black, but with a velvety gloss that had a sheen of its own, like the sheen of a full sea under a midnight sky.

Far away in the direction of Bab-el-Wady a couple of camels were marching westward; for there the white gleam of water appeared among the sands, with a cluster of date palms just beyond. But between the entrance to the valley and the high bank of the river whence the scene was surveyed by Arthur Hampden, lay the irregular mounds of tawny scrub—islands in the midst of an ocean of sand.

"This is the very spot where we mustered and formed the square," said the man. "By George! one might fancy that the sun had stood still ever since, the same as it did—yes, for a space—a bit further to the east ward some years before—Joshua the son of Nun was the Wolseley of that expedition—for the colours in the sky and in the valley are just the same as they were on that evening when we waited for the charge of Fuzzy-Wuzzy. Great heavens! Where are all those men now? How many feet are they beneath the sand—that sand which they made black as they poured out from the valley? The valley was black with them before the light of the sunset had gone out of the sky. Poor beggars. The sand was black with them and with the vultures when we were going down to the boats in the morning. Poor beggars! They gave me my Cross."

Recalling at every step fresh incidents of the campaign in which he had taken part on the Nile five years before, the man continued strolling along the ridges of the high scrubby ground overlooking the sandy plain. He had had his share of the fighting at that time, and a few weeks later in the Camel Corps; so that he had a good many incidents to recall, if that was his object in wandering over the old ground. A fight is a pleasant enough incident as a subject of recollection—yes, when one has had the best of it; but before Major Hampden had strolled on for more than half a mile, he had ceased to think of the past. All his thoughts were given over to the future, and all his thoughts of the future became gradually narrowed down to the one question as to whether or not a young woman with whom he was acquainted could be induced to love him and then marry him, or to marry him and then love him, which is much the same thing, only he did not think so.

It is obvious that the adequate consideration of such a matter must occupy a longer space of time than even the amplest store of reminiscences of a campaign;

so that it is not surprising that he should have wandered on until not the faintest thread of crimson remained along the horizon line of uneven ridges to mark the place of sunset, trying to arrive at some conclusion on the many points of the question that he had under consideration.

He knew that he loved her; but this assurance was by no means equivalent to the assurance that she loved him; and he had an idea that if she did not love him, life contained no joy for him, even though it might be his good luck to take part in another campaign demanding some more hard fighting.

Did she care for him in the least?

How on earth could he tell? She was a very amiable young woman, and such a young woman is the most perplexing to the men who fall in love with her. She is so exceedingly agreeable to everyone with whom she comes in contact, it is only the most presumptuous man who can interpret her attitude into one of affection for himself to the exclusion of the others. The sunshine of the smiles of an amiable girl is pleasant to bask in, but the lover who basks in it has got as great reason to grumble as the farmer who complained that the fine summer had done all his neighbours quite as much good as it had done himself, so that the prices of produce could not be otherwise than low. Arthur Hampden felt that he had no right to assume that Violet Flaxman loved him in particular, though she had occasionally smiled upon him very pleasantly. Why should she love him instead of his elder brother, he asked himself. His elder brother had a considerable amount of property and a considerable position in his own county, so that the smiles which he had seen her bestow upon his brother might reasonably be accepted as an indication that she loved that brother.

He was thus as little comforted by these reflections as any lover must be who looks to reason for consolation. As he seated himself under the glittering stars of that Nile landscape he felt that if girls only knew what troubles their amiability now and again brings about, they would soon cease to be amiable.

That reflection proved how little he knew about the nature of women.

Then, having come to some sort of a conclusion—however unsatisfactory it might be—on the matter which he had set himself to think out, he began to wonder how he had been thoughtless enough to stray so far away from the river bank. He had actually wandered among the rocks of Bab-el-Wady, before he had seated himself. But the fact was that the landscape, breathing of peace and calm, in contrast to the rush and the roar of the battle in which he had taken part when he had last looked over its breadth, had unconsciously lured him on until he found himself at the entrance to the valley.

He jumped up from where he sat smoking a cigar, and was in the act of taking his bearings by such landmarks as were still visible, when he became aware of the movement as of some animal behind him. Before he could turn round he was struck on the side of the head with a heavy pistol. He reeled for a moment, then with his teeth set he sprang upon the turbaned figure of a Bedouin. He had his fingers upon the loose flesh of his throat before they both fell in a heap on the ground. Another blow on the back of the head was needed to cause his hold on the man's throat to relax. He lay there with his face to the stars, just as he had witnessed so many men lying about the same place five years before, and the robbers—there were three of them—proceeded in a thoroughly business-like

manner, but with great Oriental dignity and a grace of attitude that would have been appreciated by a sculptor—provided that he was not in their hands—to pick his pockets. They took his watch, his pocket aneroid, his cigar case, his scarf-pin and the white scarf that it fastened, his collar stud, his sleeve links, his silk hand kerchief, and everything that was his, including a sovereign or two in English gold and a franc or two in French silver.

They did the business very adroitly. They did not get into one another's way as less accomplished rascals would have done in stripping their victim; and they were never otherwise than dignified in their movements. When they had satisfied themselves that the man had not another pocket anywhere about him, they exchanged remarks that were highly complimentary to Allah, and prepared to take themselves off to where they had fastened their horses when, three hours before, they had seen their victim on the high bank of the river and had prayed to Allah with great earnestness to put it into his heart to stray within reach of their arms.

Just as they were at the point of starting, one of the Bedouins knelt beside where their victim was lying, and groped about the ground on each side for some moments. He gave an exclamation of satisfaction, and picked up the remainder of the cigar that Major Hampden had been smoking. Quite the half of it was unconsumed. It was a fine flavoured Laranaga.

Then the robbers went quietly to their horses, mounted them, and galloped off to the eastward, praising Allah, who had heard their prayers and had thrown a good thing in their way.

A vulture flapped slowly down to one of the rocks.

Illustration:
A vulture flapped slowly down to one of the rocks

Chapter II

WHEN Major Hampden recovered consciousness he found himself in a curious place. It suggested to him the interior of a vault. The light that was suspended above him was burning clearly, and it showed him an infinity of low, but enormously thick, columns scattered all around him, supporting a flat roof of stone. They dwindled away in the distance, resembling an illustration of the principles of perspective that he had once seen, years before. There was no indication of a wall in any direction—only this infinity of columns.

How on earth had he come here, was the thought that oppressed him. He went through the tedious operation of recalling the events that led up, as he supposed, to his arrival at this singular place. He recollected going ashore from the Nile boat and watching the sunset; but he could not pass that point. He knew that the ruins of Luxor were not many miles from where the boat had anchored; but he had no recollection of visiting Luxor or the remains of any other city of the same region.

He put up his hand mechanically to his forehead and the instant that his finger came in contact with a linen bandage which passed across his forehead to the back of his head, with a broad piece above, he remembered being attacked by the

robbers. He had received a blow and had caught the ruffian by the throat—they had fallen together, and then…

Beyond this second stage his memory refused to go, no matter what pressure he put upon it—as a matter of fact, the greater the pressure he put upon it the more feeble was its response.

But if he could not recall anything further, he was still able to draw a reasonable deduction from such incidents as he could recall, and he thought that it was reasonable to conclude that he had been found by some people, unconscious among the rocks, and that they had taken the trouble to lay him in this spacious tomb, supposing him to be dead.

He felt perfectly satisfied that he had arrived at a logical conclusion upon this matter, until he began to think of the bandage around his head. How did that bandage fit into his calculations? In his muster of the incidents which he believed to have followed that blow which he had received, where did that bandage come in?

He was puzzled. The linen was, he could feel, bound with great rigidity and fastened with a degree of precision that was unknown to desert surgery. It would be ridiculous to fancy that it was the handiwork of an Arab. It had clearly been applied by someone who had ambulance experience. Of so much he was convinced, and therefore he was compelled to acknowledge to himself that he had been mistaken in believing himself to be within a vault. No, he was not buried. The man who had skill enough to bind that bandage would certainly have cleverness enough to perceive that he was not dead but only in a condition of unconsciousness.

Then he began to ask himself if it was possible that he was still in that condition. He would, he knew, have a certain amount of difficulty persuading himself that the array of pillars which were all around him and dwindling away into the distance, was nothing more than a delusion due to some interference with those nerves that transmitted certain sensations to his brain. Still, he had studied the most recent theories of some investigators of cerebral phenomena, and he was quite ready to believe what was contrary to his senses—everyone who is desirous of accepting most modern theories must be prepared to do so.

When he was thus making reasonable progress on the road to madness, *vid* the most recent theories of cerebration, a figure wearing a white robe moved toward him from behind one of the columns, and bent over him, looking into his face. Arthur made a remark to this visitor in a language which he fondly supposed to be Arabic, and which, indeed, the Nile boatmen understood nearly as well as they did English. The white-robed figure shook his head gravely and made a remark in real Arabic, the import of which Major Hampden did not appreciate, so he also shook his head. The figure thereupon hastened away and disappeared among the forest of columns.

Arthur Hampden was more than ever inclined to accept a theory of cerebration that assumed what one writer had termed "a period of conscious inanimation," to bridge over his difficulties.

In a short time another figure in a white robe appeared and halted beside him. Arthur asked him in Arabic—his Arabic—where he was.

"Don't bother yourself trying to get over that question, my friend," said the man in the robe. "Let it be enough for you to know that you are safe for the present. How do you feel? What about that head of yours?"

"Good God!—Sefton!" exclaimed Arthur, after a pause, during which the stranger scrutinised the bandage at the back of his head.

The man laughed.

"You're all right, Arthur, my lad," said he. "When you are able to recognise a comrade after five years, you can't be in a very bad way."

There was another interval of silence, before Arthur repeated his exclamation but in a more subdued tone:

"Good God! Sefton!—Rodney Sefton!"

"Now don't worry yourself," said Sefton. "If I had had the least notion that you would recognise me I wouldn't have hurried to you just now. I don't believe that my own wife would recognise me."

Arthur gave a laugh; but suddenly he checked himself and tried to put out his hand in the direction of Sefton's. He succeeded, too, after three or four attempts.

"Oh, don't be annoyed with yourself for that laugh," said Sefton. "I laugh myself often when I think over that episode—my wife! Lord, what fools women are!"

"Thank God!" said Arthur. "If they weren't, the world would be nearly as dull as heaven—the heaven of the literary churchman."

"Oh Lord! he wants to start a theological discussion, and his temperature is a hundred and three and his skull is cracked in two places!" cried Sefton. "Hold hard, my man! I'm sorry to have to interpose when everything was shaping itself so well in the direction of a full-flavoured argument on heaven and woman and other abstractions, but I really must veto any further talk until I get your temperature below a hundred. I must shift that ice bag an inch or two—so. Now take a spoonful of this mixture of mine, and in a day or two you'll be able to make yourself as unintelligible as the ablest theologian—"

Illustration:
„Now take a spoonful of this mixture of mine”

"In the British army," said Arthur. "It's all right, Rodney, I'll do anything that you tell me; I did so once before, when you took such a gloomy view of the scratch I got at Abu Klea."

"And the result is that you are here today," said Sefton.

"Yes, that is how I came to be here—that, and a few other incidents with which I am as yet unacquainted. By the bye, would it be going too far if I were now to enquire where I am? I remember everything up to the attack made upon me by those rascals, but at that point my memory breaks down."

"You must ask nothing, my friend. You've got to go asleep and to remain so for, say, forty-eight hours."

"I'm due at Cairo in a week."

"Then you must sleep for seventy-two hours. Do you feel more pain at the back of your head or in the region of the temple?"

"All that I feel is an intermittent stinging pain just above my ears. What does that mean?"

"That means that you must sleep for four days and four nights. Begin now."

He walked away and disappeared in a few moments from Arthur's view among the intricacies of that forest of pillars.

The surprise that Major Hampden felt at meeting his old comrade Doctor Rodney Sefton in this place prevented his falling asleep with the promptitude which Rodney Sefton seemed to expect from him. He could not avoid repeating the doctor's name several times as he mused upon the extraordinary circumstance of his coming upon him after an interval of close upon five years.

In a few minutes he had begun to feel that only on the assumption that he had been dreaming, was his meeting with Rodney Sefton susceptible of explanation. He had become reconciled to this view of the situation before the light of the lamp grew pale to his eyes, and the confusing mingling of the pillars in the distance became still more confused. It sickened him to watch that grey stonework dwindling into the blackness of the distance. He closed his eyes against its influence, and felt that he was dying.

He somehow felt glad to die. It would be a relief to him to have solved in a moment the mystery of those pillars—the mystery of this dream of talking with Rodney Sefton—the mystery of Violet Flaxman—whether she loved him or not. Yes, he felt a languid sort of satisfaction in the reflection that he need not vex himself further on any of these matters. He was dying, and they would all be solved in a few minutes.

He closed his eyes, and did not open them again for thirteen hours.

Chapter III

WHEN Arthur Hampden awoke it was with a sense of being refreshed beyond any previous sensation of refreshment he had experienced. His brain was now clear; he could count the columns that surrounded him without being greatly confused. He recollected all that had happened before he had slept, and now it never occurred to him that his meeting with Rodney Sefton was a vision.

He wondered how he could have been stupid enough to fail to see that the occurrence was a natural one; it might have been foreseen as easily as the attack by the Bedouins. Did not everyone know that Rodney Sefton had retired from the army so soon as he had returned with the Nile Expedition from Khartoum? Was there anyone still unacquainted with the fact that, after his retirement, he had devoted himself to the work of excavation with which his name had for several years been closely associated? What, then, was there remarkable in his coming in contact once again with his old comrade?

Rodney Sefton had been the chief medical officer attached to the brigade with which Arthur Hampden had gone through the Egyptian campaign. He had been selected for this post by that General who has never hesitated to advance into prominent positions the most suitable officers, even though his doing so has involved the shelving of the unsuitable who howled in consequence. But in the case of Dr. Sefton the howls were minimized, for it was well known that he had had more experience of the Nile region than any man in the Service. His reputation

as an Egyptologist had travelled even beyond the Service: it had long before become established in every part of Europe. It was understood that he had outstripped the most laborious of German investigators of ancient hieroglyphics; he had, it was allowed, added another thousand years to the records of civilization. He had boldly assigned the date B.C. 5200 to one of the inscriptions to which he had succeeded in assigning an historical value.

It could scarcely be doubted that this was the right man to receive the appointment. It was understood that, next to Providence and cold tea, the success of the expedition would be dependent upon the efficiency of the medical staff, and the course of events showed that this assumption was fully justified. Dr. Sefton proved that his knowledge of the conditions necessary to health in the Nile region of today was as extensive and as accurate as his acquaintance with the idiosyncrasies of the Pharaohs of a thousand years or thereabouts before Joseph; and on the return of the brigade to Cairo it was known that a C.B. awaited the chief of the medical staff.

It soon became known also that a letter awaited Rodney Sefton—a letter from his wife whom he had left in England, mentioning, with other matters, the fact that she had recently discovered that her love had been transferred from her husband to one of his neighbours, with whom she had gone to live in a pleasant and healthy French watering-place.

On receiving this letter Rodney Sefton had, without going to Europe, retired from the Service, and made excavation the business of his life—previously it had only been a holiday recreation. It was rumoured that his new book would ante-date civilization by yet another thousand years.

All this Arthur Hampden recalled to mind within the first few minutes of his awaking from his thirteen hours' sleep. He had no doubt that he had been found unconscious by Dr. Sefton among the rocks of Bab-el-Wady, and conveyed to one of the palaces or temples which Sefton had partially excavated. An hour had passed, however, before the doctor appeared and corroborated his surmises.

"But what I cannot understand," said Sefton, "is how you came to be close upon two miles from the river at that hour of the evening. Surely you must have known that the region is swarming with Bedouin robbers who would think no more of cutting a man's throat than you would of slicing a cucumber for a salad."

"I was an ass," said Arthur. "I had come up the river to have a look at the old fighting ground—my brother and his party I left at Cairo—and when I got ashore from the boat I began to think over some matters that have been causing me a deal of thought lately, and I became so absorbed as to forget where I was. I suppose those rascals escaped?"

"They did; but I'll get you back your property in the course of a day or two," said Sefton. "Those fellows are not licensed to steal from me or my friends. I did their Sheikh a good turn, and he shows his gratitude by giving me and my friends a clean bill for all this region. I dare say you were thinking about a girl."

"I was," said Arthur, meekly. "I've chucked the Service."

"And you mean to go over to the enemy?"

"I hope that I'll be lucky enough to get accepted. She is at Cairo with my brother and some of her people: I wish now that I hadn't been seized with that insane desire to revisit the scene of the fight."

"It may be all for the best: your brother has come in for the property, I believe."

"What do you mean? If you suggest that that girl—"

"I suggest nothing except that you should keep as tranquil as possible for the next few days—if the young woman accepts you, you may look back on the tranquillity of these few days as the camel-drivers look back on the days spent at one of the oases of the Soudan."

Arthur laughed at the expression of the doctor's pessimism. He felt that the doctor had a right to whatever consolation pessimism can afford to a sufferer.

"I'll obey you implicitly," said he. "And now I hope it won't be prejudicial to the course which you have prescribed, for you to tell me where I happen to be at the present moment. From a cursory glance round this place I should say that you have been fortunate enough to discover the growing place of all the pillars of all the churches of the world. It looks like a pillar nursery."

"Yes; there's a pretty fair lot of them, isn't there?" said the doctor. "Things were done on a large scale in those days."

"What days are those days?"

"Heaven knows. This is, so far as I can gather, the Temple of Hevoth, and he may be called the father of all gods. Three years ago I came upon a papyrus written by the Theban scribe Ennana who was, I need hardly tell you, the Royal Librarian to Merenptah the Pharaoh of the Exodus. It was, as usual, enclosed in an earthen cylinder, and it contained a reference to the excavations which were then exciting a good deal of interest in antiquarian circles in Egypt. The Temple of Hevoth and the Court of the Thousand Pillars seemed, according to this document, to promise excellent results to the archaeologists. Over a thousand years had passed since they had disappeared, as all things Egyptian disappear, in the sands, and reference was made to its ancient glories when Hevoth was still worshipped. It was that papyrus which led me to search for the Temple. After a year I found it, but not by excavation."

"How, then?"

"I came across a High Priest of Hevoth, and he led me to the Temple. The worship had not died out—it has not yet died out, though all modern Egyptologists refer to it as something that was no more than a vague myth in the days of the Exodus. I have been working at the Hevoth problem for two years and I have made some discoveries in connection with it."

"Of what nature?"

"Of What nature?" The doctor looked into Arthur's face, and, after a pause, gave a laugh. Then he became grave. He rose from the low, rough-hewn stone bench where he had been sitting, and walked some distance away, returning after an interval very slowly.

"You want to know what is the nature of my discoveries?" said he. "I can lead you to the fringe of some of them; that's all. I have succeeded in deciphering a few inscriptions on the hieratic papyri written four thousand years ago, and from them I learned that this Temple was at that time at least a thousand years old, and that it was built on the foundations of another that had existed a thousand years. The list of dynasties previous to the building of the original Temple extended over two thousand years more. Beyond that date Hevoth worship becomes somewhat

obscure. But the fact remains: I can lay my hand on a chapter of the history of the world written ten thousand years ago."

"That's a longish space of time," remarked Major Hampden; "it makes one's head ache, especially when referred to in this place."

"That must be avoided at any sacrifice," said the doctor, drawing a long breath. "You are quite right: it needs a man to be very fit before he can take in the idea of a civilization ten thousand years old, Hampden. To go back ten thousand years is to bring a man at least a stride closer to the great Beginning of things. The old writer—he may have written his papyrus on this very bench—who recorded that five-thousand-year-old tradition about the sons of God walking about the earth and in love with the daughters of men, was, I believe, a priest of Hevoth. The priests of Hevoth were the descendants of the offspring of those unions. The sons of God communicated their secrets—of that change which we call Life, of that change which we call Death—to their children, and one of them wrote down much that he knew on some slabs of stone which I unearthed. By the aid of an old man—the oldest of the priests of Hevoth—God only knows what age he is—I am in possession of the key to the system of writing that can still be seen traced upon the stone pages."

"What value are the secrets, I should like to know?"

"What value? Hampden, have you followed me and do you yet ask of what value are these secrets? Think of it, Hampden—think what is meant by that record of which I have told you. The wisdom of the sons of God—the revelation that came direct from the Beginning of all things—the origin of Life—the One who created the Soul of man and endowed it with immortality—think of it, Hampden."

"The good old Bible is good enough for me."

"It is a faithful record. Many of the early pages of the book of Genesis were, I believe, written in this Temple. The scribe was a priest of Hevoth, and the truths that he recorded he had heard from his forefathers who inherited it in an unbroken line from their earliest progenitors, the sons of God. The books which I am deciphering daily constitute other records derived from the same source, and committed to the stones thousands of years before Abraham was born."

"My head—my head!"

"What a fool I am! A man is apt to be carried away by his enthusiasms and to forget the weaker brethren. But you will not suffer, Arthur, my friend. You are making a first-rate recovery. You slept for thirteen hours, and the fever has left you. You have some appetite, I dare say."

"Not much. Shall I be able to get on my way tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow—not the next day; perhaps in a week if you maintain your improvement."

"Too long—too long."

"You can only submit. Think how much longer you would be reaching Cairo if I hadn't frightened off that vulture that sat on a rock just above your head—waiting. A week of desert fare will do you all the good in the world. I'll see what can be done for you."

He returned in a short time, accompanied by a couple of white-robed men who carried earthen trays bearing a variety of comestibles—the tender flesh of a kid prepared with rice formed the *pièce de résistance*. Fresh dates and grapes were on

one of the trays, and also an earthen bottle containing some ice-cold wine, the flavour of which baffled Major Hampden. He had never tasted anything like it before.

He wondered if the wine was a thousand years old.

Chapter IV

ONLY when he tried to sit up in his bed—a soft mattress of camel's hair—did Major Hampden become aware of the extent of his own weakness. He made several attempts to assume a sitting posture, but failing in all, Dr. Sefton lent him a helping hand and the feat was accomplished.

"I had no notion that I was so feeble," said Arthur.

"I thought it better to let you gain information on that point for yourself," said the doctor. "A patient by such means learns more about his condition in a moment than a doctor could impress upon him in a week. Now you can understand the value of what I said to you regarding the duration of your convalescence. I'm glad, however, to see that you're not discouraged by what you have found out."

"It only encourages me to make a hearty meal." said Arthur. "I feel as I did the first week after I got my wound at Abu Klea—as if I could never get enough food to satisfy my appetite. You told me then that food meant strength."

"It was not a remark that showed any extraordinary medical wisdom," said the doctor. "But it was true, though it did come from a Brigade-Surgeon."

While Arthur Hampden was eating his simple meal and rolling the wonderful wine upon his palate puzzling himself over the flavour, he was looking around him, observing more narrowly the peculiarities of the architecture of the place. Previously he had been compelled to acquaint himself with its leading features from a very unfavourable point of view. But all the additional information that he now acquired was not great. He perceived, how ever, that the columns were not irregularly scattered between the floor and the roof of the building, but that they were arranged in the design of a triangle within a triangle—that is to say, if lines were drawn from pillar to pillar these lines would form the sides of a series of equilateral triangles interlaced, as it were.

"Curious, is it not?" said the doctor, who was watching him carefully. "The principle of that design seems to have existed from the foundation of the earth."

"It has its meaning as a symbol," said Arthur.

"I shouldn't wonder," said the doctor, smiling the smile of the Senior Wrangler at the accomplishment of a sum in simple addition by a school-boy. "I shouldn't wonder indeed. What do you think of that wine?"

His tone suggested that he was well aware of the fact that if Major Hampden was out of his depth where any question of symbol ism was concerned, he was quite at home in any discussion as to the quality of a particular wine.

"The wine is a mystery," replied Arthur. "I have been trying to give it a name; but without success. Perhaps you will tell me that it is part of a bin that had such disastrous effects upon Noah; or maybe Madame Potiphar had it on the table when Joseph dined tête-à-tête with her."

Illustration:
„The wine is a mystery“

"Oh, dear no," said Sefton. "I can claim no such antiquity for it. No, it is a modern vintage—comparatively modern. But I have every reason to believe that it was in this wine Cleopatra dissolved her pearl when she drank to her lover from Rome. At any rate it has the quality of dissolving pearls, and I don't know any other wine that is so endowed."

"But how about keeping it?" said Arthur.

"The earthen bottles in which the old Egyptian wine was stored, possessed the property of preserving it for practically an unlimited space of time," said the doctor. "My own idea is that before being ovened, the clay was impregnated with some chemical having a quality akin to that of alcohol, and the action of the wine upon the bottle was sufficient to extract from the material all that was necessary for its own preservation. I have seen some very old Egyptian bottles that had become the merest egg-shell, owing to the action of the wine upon the interior."

"It's no wonder that I couldn't locate this vintage," said Hampden. "What a pity it is that the secret of those bottles has been lost."

"Oh, the bottle theory is merely a surmise of my own," said the doctor. "The wine itself may have contained the preserving ingredient when originally bottled. It is quite likely that the Egyptians employed such a chemical. The more I investigate the conditions of the civilization of Egypt the more amazed do I become. And yet the popular idea is that the only knowledge that the ancient people in this region possessed beyond what is at our command today, was how to transport immense masses of stone. They knew more than that, Hampden."

"So I'm beginning to gather," said Hampden, lying back on his pillow, having drunk the last drop of his wine.

"And now I'll leave you for an hour or two," said the doctor. "I have some work to do. Hampden, my friend, we are on the brink of a great discovery—a discovery that will revolutionize the world—a discovery that will be pronounced the most stupendous that the world has yet known, and yet one that only represents what was known to the founders of this Temple in the days when the sons of God walked the earth, and the average life of a man was a trifle under a thousand years. Think of that, Hampden—a thousand years! Has it ever occurred to you to enquire how that was managed? No; I dare say it never cost you a thought, any more than it has some hundreds of millions of men who believe implicitly in the statements of the Book of Genesis, and who yet are fully aware of the fact that the average age of a man under the best sanitary conditions is now something between thirty and thirty-five years. Hampden, we are on the brink of a great discovery."

He spoke the last sentence very gravely, almost startling his patient; and then walked noiselessly away without another word.

When he found himself alone Arthur Hampden had a good deal to think about. He had always had a great admiration for Rodney Sefton; once before he had owed his life to the skill of his friend; and he had, besides, become so intimately acquainted with his ability as the chief of the medical staff, he could not but feel

that he was a man to be admired. Now, however, Major Hampden felt that his friend had, like so many other archaeological enthusiasts, failed to al low himself to be controlled by reason in the framing of his theories. To be sure, he had not formulated a definite theory on any subject he had introduced in the course of his conversation; but he had spoken with an air of mystery in referring to many matters, especially such as had a bearing upon the Hevoth-worship which Sefton had said was still conducted within the Temple of many pillars, and he had finally introduced that puzzling question of age statistics recorded in the earlier chapters of the Book of Gene sis—a question to which Arthur Hampden himself had frequently given the gravest consideration between the ages of six and ten years.

He found it impossible to arrive at any other conclusion from observing the bearing of his friend Sefton, than that his long seclusion from the world, his investigations into the archaeology of ancient Egypt, and above all, his residence in this extraordinary Temple buried beneath the desert sands, had produced an impression upon his susceptible mind that could only be obliterated by a speedy return to the civilization of the present day, or at least that form of it which is to be found in English social life.

Major Hampden shrank from suggesting that his friend had become mad; he merely felt that he had dwelt for too long upon one subject of study, and that he was giving evidence of the effects of that error in judgement, as every student of one subject must in the long run. Those who become overweighted with one subject invariably lose their mental balance, Arthur Hampden had often heard. It is on this account that students of art, as taught in Paris, are careful to seek relaxation in nature (as found in the Latin Quarter); and that students of the science of warfare keep in touch with the English drama (as found at the stage doors of certain theatres). It is on this account that students of whist should take to theology as a recreation, and that students of the most recent form of English fiction should devote their spare moments to light literature.

Being well aware of the great danger of pursuing one form of study to the exclusion of all other forms, Arthur Hampden felt for his friend, who was, he believed, showing signs of having yielded too easily to the fascinations held out to him by the archaeology of the region of the Nile. There was, of course, he was ready to admit, much that was intensely interesting in the points suggested by Sefton—that point about the longevity of Noah and his sons unto the third and fourth generations, was an interesting one and well worthy of an hour's consideration—Noah belonged to a long-lived stock: his grandfather being one Methuselah—but it was quite another matter to give up one's life to the study of such statistics.

Yes, it seemed pretty plain to Arthur Hampden that his friend the doctor had lost his way, so to speak, among the labyrinths of a history so ancient and mysterious that no mind could pursue its course for long without being bewildered. He hoped that there was still time to save his friend from the irretrievable disaster that was certain to await his continuance in the same pursuit. Yes, he would do his best to induce Sefton to take a trip to England. A round of country-houses in the winter, followed by a few months in London in the summer would certainly do much in the way of restoring the mental equilibrium of

a man who had been during five years interested in nothing more recent than B.C. 8000.

And while he was letting his thoughts run in that direction, his friend was pacing a strange gallery that ran round a hall of that Temple of pillars, asking himself if he had done wisely in stimulating the interest of his patient in the mysteries which he himself had only partially mastered after five years of continuous labour. He had frequently, during this period, longed for the company of a congenial fellow country-man; and there was no man whom he could more earnestly have desired to have beside him than Arthur Hampden; so that when he had come upon him lying among the rocks of Bab-el-Wady, he felt that Providence had granted to him the boon for which he had been longing. He had thus been led to make the attempt to inspire Arthur with some of his own enthusiasm on the study which was engrossing the best years of his life—the study which he felt he would only cease pursuing when his heart had ceased to beat.

Had he acted wisely in the matter?

He spent an hour pacing his gallery trying to answer this question to his own satisfaction. He had brought his friend up to the very threshold of a great discovery which he believed he had made. He had brought him within a man's stride of the solution of the greatest mystery that it has been given the soul of man to solve.

Had he acted wisely?

Before he had resumed his daily work of deciphering the innumerable tablets, written in a language that was ancient in the days of Abraham, and stored in a room in this Temple that had been hidden in the desert sands a thousand years before the days of Joseph, he had come to the conclusion that he had not been precipitate in his action in this matter. He meant to keep Arthur Hampden beside him and he had gone the legitimate way about effecting his purpose; he had endeavoured to arouse his enthusiasm in the mysteries that were awaiting solution in this region of mysteries. If he succeeded in this matter he knew that he would bind his friend to him with a bond that could only be severed by death or a woman.

Rodney Sefton dreaded more the power of the woman than the power of death.

He knew man, and he had known a woman.

Chapter V

IT is possible that Dr. Sefton would have been disappointed had he been aware of the relative weight of the consideration given by his patient to Egyptian archaeology on the one hand and to the question of the possibility that he was beloved by Violet Flaxman on the other hand. It would, however, be impossible to say that Arthur was not impressed with the doctor's words—with his suggestion of mysteries at the point of being solved. He was greatly impressed with all that he had heard, in spite of his having come to the conclusion that his friend stood in need of a course of country-houses during the hunting season and of Mayfair in the month of June. But he was much more deeply impressed with the need that

there was for himself to be at the side of Violet Flaxman at Cairo, if he meant to ask that young woman to marry him; and he had come to perceive very clearly that that was just what he meant to do.

An intimate acquaintance with the conditions of life in the region of the Nile eight or ten thousand years ago, he regarded as inferior in importance to an acquaintance with the thoughts of Miss Flaxman on the subject of himself. What did it matter to him that his friend was on the brink of the greatest discovery that the world had ever known, so long as he himself had not yet discovered if Miss Flaxman cared for him a little? He continued thinking about Violet Flaxman as he lay awake hour after hour in the dead silence of the ancient Temple—a Temple? He had come to think of it as a sepulchre—a sepulchre that had itself been buried for many thousand years.

He disappointed his friend greatly by his show of impatience when he found, on awaking from his next sleep, that he was very little stronger than he had been previous to their last chat together.

"You are anxious to get away?" said the doctor, somewhat mournfully.

"Of course I am," he replied. "You would be anxious too if you were situated as I am."

"The girl?" said the doctor, laconically.

"The girl," replied Hampden, emphatically. "You don't believe anything of what I said to you yesterday?"

"On the contrary, I believe every word that you said—was it only yesterday? It seems a month ago. I have no idea in this tomb whether it is day or night in the world outside. By heaven, Sefton, I feel sometimes that this form of existence is death—that I have passed into the mystery which lies beyond the grave—that I am dead and buried and that you and those strange silent white figures that come here sometimes are nothing more than the spectres one thinks of in connection with death. I wonder if I shall ever see Cairo again. I wonder if I shall ever hear again the song of a lark in the early morning, or of a blackbird in the soft dusk of an English landscape. My God! I must get away from here, Sefton, before many days have passed. If I don't I shall stay here forever; for what is now with me but a fancy will become a reality. I shall be dead and buried."

"You are making satisfactory progress toward recovery: you will be able to leave here in ten days, if you maintain your improvement; but if you become excited as you are just now you will be here for a month—perhaps two months."

"My dear old boy, you must make allowance for me. Think of the importance to me of being back in Cairo before she leaves for England."

"You have not thought anything about the matters upon which we touched in the course of our conversation yesterday, Hampden?"

"I have thought a great deal, I assure you. I give you my word that if I were free tomorrow there's nothing in the world that I would turn to with greater interest than these wonderful investigations of yours. You said a good deal, Sefton; but I feel that you left much more unsaid."

Sefton smiled.

"You are right there, Hampden: I left a good deal unsaid; I am weak enough to have an ambition to appear not wholly insane in your estimation. Yes, I left a good deal unsaid."

"I thought so; I need scarcely say that my interest was all the more stimulated in your splendid work—in the marvellous investigations which you have made the business of your life."

"But you do not consider these investigations worthy of being set against a humdrum existence with a commonplace English wife in a hunting shire?"

"I don't know about a commonplace English wife, Sefton; but I have no hesitation in declaring that I don't reckon all your investigations worth setting against a lifetime spent in an English home by the side of the girl whom I am hungering to see and thirsting to hear. There you are now—there's the business in a nutshell."

"Poor fellow! I have met thousands just like you: the world may break up and Chaos come again if you only have your day with the one girl—she is best when she is most commonplace: the uncommon girl is the dangerous one—whom you love for the time being."

"By heaven, you have exactly interpreted what I feel."

"Your case is a simple one; it would be impossible for me to be mistaken in my diagnosis. Very well, my friend. I promise you to do my best for you. I will send you on your mission to investigate that mystery of womankind—every woman seems a mystery to the man who is in love with her. Marriage is the interpretation of that mystery. To have been married is to be acquainted with the language in which the mystery has been originally inscribed. Marriage is the cartouche of the hieroglyphic inscription. Yes; I'll send you to her. I can still hope for the best: she may reject you. Au revoir."

"Poor fellow!" murmured Arthur, as his friend penetrated the dense forest of pillars and disappeared. "Poor fellow! One can understand his cynicism. She treated him infernally, that wife of his. That is the mischief of a woman of that stamp: she destroys a good man's belief in all women. Poor fellow! He has an idea that all women are nothing more than monoliths bearing identical hieroglyphic inscriptions: when you have read one you can read all the others. Poor fellow! Thank God I know better."

* * * * *

The doctor made no further attempt to interest his patient in matters Egyptian. He referred no more to the possibility of success crowning his attempts to decipher those tablets which had lain for thousands of years buried in the buried Temple; nor did he once again make a remark respecting the great discovery whose threshold he had said he hoped soon to pass. He allowed his patient to do all the talking—to tell him how he had been so fortunate as to meet Miss Violet Flaxman at a country-house the previous winter, and how he had perceived without a moment's misgiving that Providence meant to lead him to more than earthly felicity by her—how they had had some good runs to hounds together (circumstantially described), and how they had afterwards met on various staircases during the months of May and June in England—how he had not yet exactly proposed to her, but how he thought she was not altogether averse to him—how by an extra ordinary stroke of good fortune (Providence again) she and her father were travelling to Egypt by the same steamer that was carrying him and his brother to Sicily, and how he had induced his brother to go on to Egypt.

Illustration:
She and her father were travelling to Egypt

All this Major Hampden told his friend Dr. Sefton, furnishing him also (he pretended to be extremely sympathetic) with numerous details of the voyage and of the week's residence at Cairo previous to his making that ill-fated excursion up the Nile, ostensibly to gratify his craving to revisit some of the scenes of the fighting five years before, but in reality to think over the whole question of asking Miss Flaxman to have the goodness to marry him. The idea of his taking such a step struck him as being audacious almost beyond expression, he was so unworthy of the priceless treasure of her love. Her love was above rubies—not the common stones, which were really little better than garnets, but the best specimens to be found in Upper Burmah. Ah, that was her love. And what right had he to fancy for a moment that he could claim so priceless a possession? He was only a man after all: and no man who breathed was worthy of such love as that which Violet Flaxman had to bestow. She was the one girl in the world. She was....

Oh, he had no difficulty in defining her up to a certain point, and this point Dr. Sefton knew to represent the breaking strain of his memory. He could only describe this one girl in the world in the very words that thousands and tens of thousands of men have employed to describe the perfections of the women with whom they were in love. Rodney Sefton waited, wondering if the fellow would alight upon some novel word or phrase—when a man is describing to you the perfections of the woman whom he fancies he loves, you must put some question to yourself and think it out, if you wish to appear sympathetic; and Dr. Sefton set himself thinking out how many other men he could recollect confiding to him the incident of their loving in the self-same phrases as were now flowing from the lips of Arthur Hampden.

It was an arithmetical feat, and the earnestness with which he devoted himself to its accomplishment caused Arthur to have the highest respect for him as a sympathetic listener. He was no longer cynical, Arthur perceived, and he took to himself the credit of converting him from cynicism to sympathy.

The days somehow did not seem to pass so slowly now that he had found a listener whose ear was open to the story of his love. This was the opinion of the man who assumed the attitude of the loquacious lover; but the man who was forced to look at his story from the standpoint of the man whose wife has run away from him, may have found the days to pass drearily enough. The deciphering of the revelations of the tablets called for many hours of close work; but the revelations were striking—sometimes appalling in their novelty. They belonged to another world. But Arthur Hampden's love story...

But Arthur Hampden was quite satisfied, and that was everything.

Chapter VI

ARTHUR HAMPDEN grew stronger every day; and the stronger he grew the more disposed was he to take a liberal view of the doctor's eccentricity. After all, a man has a right to devote himself to whatever occupation may suit his particular bent of mind. This he was ready to acknowledge; and he felt that he had perhaps concluded too hastily that his friend was off his balance in giving up his life to the deciphering of ancient documents scratched upon stone. The fact that he had shown himself open to conversion, as it were, in respect of the topic upon which he had previously been cynical, proved that he was not so far gone as Arthur had at first supposed.

(This handsome admission was made by Arthur after the doctor had listened for some hours daily to his account of the perfections of Violet Flaxman.)

Then it was that Arthur began to be aware of his own selfishness—he had an uneasy feeling that if he did not take care he might leave himself open to the charge of repeating himself so far as that story of his was concerned; and he knew that this would never do. It was the force of this impression that caused him to offer a little indulgence to his friend the Egyptologist—to offer him an innings, so to speak.

"My dear Sefton," said he one day—he was now able to sit up and walk about the place with only a little assistance. "My dear Sefton, don't you fancy for a moment that because I haven't been talking much of late on the subject of your investigations I take no interest in your work."

"Oh, no; I could never fancy that," said Sefton.

"Now you're sarcastic," said Arthur. "But what I say is, that if you fancy I haven't lost all interest in—in—well, in your discoveries—your investigations and so forth, how is it that you never think it worthwhile talking about them as you did at first?"

"Well, you see, Arthur, my friend, we've never been without a topic of conversation," replied the doctor, "and it occurred to me—I may have been mistaken—that you were as greatly interested in the topic which was before us as you would possibly be in the subject of the inscriptions in the Book of Hevoth."

"That's all very well, but why should there only be one topic between us?" said Arthur. "Hang it, man, we're not such barren rascals as all that! I think, you know, that I should make the most of my time now that I am compelled to be in this place. I think I should be shown all that there is to be seen here. How queer, isn't it, that, after a while, the strangest situation becomes natural to a man? When I first found myself here—in the centre of these innumerable pillars, I felt astonished beyond measure, and yet now I have become so accustomed to look up and see that sickly light suspended above my head, I almost forget what the light of day is like. I suppose that in another year I'll look back on my sojourn here as the most remarkable experience of my life."

"I dare say too, that it will bear to be so regarded," said Sefton. "Yes, even if you see nothing more of the place."

"But I want to see more of it, my good fellow," cried Hampden. "I want to see every nook of it—every cranny. Is there any reason why I shouldn't?"

"Not that I know of. Only I think that I shouldn't care to see this place brought down to the low level of a 'sight'—one of the Nile tourists' 'sights', to be marked off on the margin of the Guide book when it has been thoroughly explored—perhaps

by people from Chicago. Great heaven! just think of it! The Temple of Hevoth echoing a Yankee drawl!"

"That should be averted at any sacrifice. I think you may trust to me to keep your Secret."

"If I had not been quite certain on that score I'm very much afraid that—"

"That what?"

"Well, that that vulture would have had his supper, that's all. No, there's no need for me to make you give me any promise or take any solemn oath not to reveal anything of this place or of what you may see before you go into the outer world again—the world of Sheffield and Chicago; so if you are interested enough in your present surroundings to wish to see more of them, I'll be your personal conductor for once, though I frankly acknowledge that I'm only beginning to know something of the place myself. There are courts and passages and halls here that I have not yet explored."

"Is that possible? Good Lord! what an extent of ground it must cover!"

"You must remember that it is the most wonderful work that has yet come from the hand of man, and I believe it to be the storehouse of such wisdom as makes all the wisdom of the world seem trivial. Everything in this region is on a vast scale. The Pyramids—they were built, I am convinced, to treasure the same mystery as that which I am slowly mastering within these walls. Then the Sphinx—has not its face been for ages regarded as a type of an inscrutable wisdom? Is not its face the face of a god that keeps his secret? And yet these are but symbols; but on what a scale have they been planned? Do people still exist who believe that the Pyramids were built by various Egyptian rulers as tombs for themselves?—that the figure to which the name of Sphinx was given was merely a freak of a stone mason with a genius transcending that of Michelangelo?—that it is only an accident that has placed the figure with the inscrutable face in proximity to the Pyramids?"

"Sefton, do you really believe that your investigations will reveal the mystery of the Pyramids—the secret of the Sphinx?"

Hampden's voice had sunk to a whisper—a whisper that had something of awe in it.

There was a long pause before Sefton answered him.

"I am in the position of a man who has his hand on the latch of a door leading to the treasure that he seeks," said the doctor. "If you feel strong enough to do a little exploring, come along with me now, and I'll give you an idea of the Temple—I'll show you why I consider it the most stupendous work that ever came from the hand of man."

"I feel quite strong," said Hampden. "That is to say, strong enough for a stroll of a mile or so. I don't suppose that the place extends over a greater area than a square mile."

The doctor laughed.

"My dear Hampden," said he, "there is one corridor here that is three miles long. The Court of the Thousand Pillars in which we now stand covers an area of over a mile. The Court of the High Priest of Hevoth is, I should say, quite four miles from where we stand at present."

"Why, the place is not a Temple, but a town," said Hampden. "And it is all buried in the sand, as Pompeii is buried in the ashes of Vesuvius?"

"It is all out of sight," replied the doctor. "The sands of thousands of years cover it. I told you that even in the days of the Pharaoh of the Exodus, the exact site of the Temple was a fruitful topic of discussion among the antiquaries of the period. It was old in the days of Menes, the first king of Egypt, who lived B.C. 3892. But in addition to the narrow entrance among the rocks of Bab-el-Wady—we brought you here through that entrance—there are two others: one is at a ruined temple on the banks of the river; it is much beloved by tourists and amateur Egyptologists who have not the smallest notion how near they are to a discovery that would make their names famous; the other is in the face of the cliff known as Raz-Haffla. Some of the Bedouin tribes are acquainted with this entrance; but, happily, they have some legend connected with it: they believe it to be one of the entrances to the hell of the Koran; hence they have always given it a wide berth. We are not likely to be troubled by tourists in that direction."

"But the priests—you said that there were still priests of Hevoth—where are they to be found?" asked Arthur.

"There is a colony of them on a slope of the Himalayas," said the doctor. "Another colony is in Afghanistan. I knew one of the priests in Ceylon—he is a successful merchant, and there is actually another in a village in Kent; his name is Albaran. Not all of them have been here—some of them do not even know of the existence of the Temple; but others come here and perform in turn the duties of their worship—the most ancient system of theology in the world."

"But if they all know the secret it can no longer be called a secret," said Hampden. "I agree with you," said the doctor; "but there is not one of them who knows it. There is only one of them who knows any of the characters in which the secret is written. Now come along and I'll do my best not to overtax your strength."

Chapter VII

THEY went together among the pillars, Hampden leaning on the shoulder of his friend; and although the light, which was still hanging over where Hampden had been lying, appeared like a star in the distance, it failed, of course, to cast the smallest gleam of light beyond a hundred yards or so from its niche, and its spark was soon hidden by the intervening stone-work. The blackness of darkness surrounded the two men; darkness like that of a crypt—heavy, palpable as a thick garment.

But to the doctor at least, the absence of light meant nothing; he had become so accustomed to the track among the intricacies of the masonry that he walked on it with confidence, in spite of the darkness. His companion, however, showed some hesitation apart from that which was to be attributed to his physical weakness.

"You need be under no apprehension of an accident, so long as you keep by my side," said the doctor. "It is not much to say that I could find my way blindfold here, for that is precisely what our position is just now."

"I never knew what was meant by Egyptian darkness before," said Arthur. "But I place myself unreservedly in your hands. I promise to stick by you."

"It is the safest thing you could do," said the doctor. "I was for a year in this place before I could venture a hundred yards from a light; but now I can go for miles in any direction without getting lost. You've heard of the fish in the Mammoth cave of Kentucky? They've no eyes. Having lived for some thousands of years without any need for eyes, they got rid of them altogether. I dare say it would be the same with ourselves here, only that I have great need for my eyes when I am at work among my stone documents."

They had gone about a quarter of a mile through the dense darkness before a little spark appeared in the distance.

"That is our Pole Star," said the doctor. "We are not going very far today."

"Is it day or night, just now?" asked Hampden.

"Upon my word, for the moment I can hardly answer you," said the doctor. "I get out of my reckoning very quickly when I'm not at my work. I need scarcely say that I have a special ray of daylight laid on for my own use when I am at work."

"That helps to keep you straight, I'm sure," said Arthur. "But I should like to know where you get it."

"Through a crevice in the rocks about a mile from here," replied Sefton. "'Tis not so deep as a well nor so wide as a church door, but it suffices."

When they reached the light that had been seen gleaming through the distance, Hampden perceived that it was not suspended in an ordinary niche but in a deep hollow of the pillar. He saw that in the pillar, which was about ten feet in diameter, a passage had been hewn; but only when he had gone close to it did he become aware of the fact that there was a flight of steps, downward from this passage. The staircase was broad enough to allow of four men walking abreast on it.

"Are we to descend?" Hampden enquired of his guide.

Illustration:
„Are we to descend?”

"Yes; but for the first time I have to caution you against the steps," said the doctor. "The feet of some thousands of years have worn the stone as smooth as a half-tide rock with seaweed clinging to it."

Arthur had, after his first day of convalescence, adopted the dress worn by the doc tor—a loose robe of white linen, with thin sandals of palm fibre; but even with these light coverings on his feet, he had the greatest difficulty descending the steps without slipping. The steps were as smooth as glass. Luckily they were very shallow: this fact alone made a descent in the ordinary way possible.

The staircase led to a long serpentine gallery built from pillar to pillar of another court whose immensity was suggested by the row of lamps—separated about thirty yards the one from the other—that dwindled away into the distance. By their light Hampden was able to see the coloured decorations of the walls of the gallery and also of the spacious court below. The decorations were not mere frescoes; they were elaborate sculptures in high relief, of figures of men and women, with horses and chariots. All were coloured brilliantly, and were shining as though they were freshly varnished.

Arthur Hampden stood lost in wonder at these marvellous decorations of the walls. Every square foot called for admiration. The features of the figures were not of that expressionless type usually to be found on Egyptian bas-reliefs; every face had its characteristics of individuality, and the attitudes of the animals were also full of character and freedom. Among them Arthur noticed not only the lion and the stag, but also the elephant, the rhinoceros, and that extinct creature, the megatherium.

He pointed this out to his companion, who acknowledged having been struck by the appearance of this figure, almost identical with the well-known illustrations of the monster as reconstructed by the late Professor Owen and other savants.

"That seems to indicate that the creature must have been living when these decorations were executed," said the doctor.

"Yes: it is alongside the lions and the tigers that we know," said Arthur. "That fact shows the antiquity of the building."

"Or the modernity of the monster," said the doctor. "But I must confess that I prefer to accept the first explanation. There are some other monsters further along; their appearance surprised me."

Arthur followed him along the gallery, until he had come opposite the reproduction of a scene which was plainly meant to be an exciting one. An army was evidently besieging a walled town. But instead of the picture containing a facsimile of an ancient catapult, it showed a group of warriors surrounding what certainly suggested a modern cannon, only it had a curiously twisted muzzle, out of which the artist had suggested smoke issuing. On the face of the wall toward which this weapon was directed, there was a considerable breach shown, with warriors lying dead around it.

"Now," said the doctor, "if that work does not represent the successful discharge of a piece of artillery I should like to know what it does represent."

"And that must have been done at least five thousand years ago," said Arthur.

"I can say nothing about the date of the mural decorations," replied the doctor. "They were probably executed years—perhaps centuries—after the building of the Temple; and probably centuries were occupied in their execution; but they were certainly completed two thousand years before the Exodus."

"That's long enough for me to think about," said Arthur. "Is there anything else as wonderful as this in the place?"

"Oh, yes; I think that you'll find some few things quite as remarkable," replied the doctor, with a smile that suggested a great deal to Arthur Hampden. "I don't want to put too much upon you all at once; but I think you should see another of these pictures in relief. Here it is."

Arthur followed him and stood facing another of the decorations of the wall. It represented a group of men, engaged in a hunt. They carried curious weapons, one of which was a large bow that plainly required three men for the discharge of its missiles. But it was not so much at the weapon as at the object against which it was directed that Hampden looked; for he saw that the object bore a close resemblance to the winged figure which appears on so many Assyrian monuments. It had a face that suggested that of a man, but it had enormous eagles' wings, and limbs like the limbs of a bull. Its wings were outspread, but it was shown as using its feet as well in flying from the hunters.

"That is surely an extraordinary creature," said Arthur. "It is the Assyrian Bull, or at least one of the same family. What special importance do you attach to this?"

"It appears to me to prove that the Assyrian Bull is no emblematic figure, as we were assured it was; but that it had a counterpart in nature," replied Sefton. "All these pictures are realistic studies from nature, and it cannot be assumed that this special work is a freak of the sculptor's fancy. Yes; although no remains of this creature have yet been discovered, there is in my mind no doubt whatever that it existed at one period in this region."

"Why should it not?" said Arthur. "It is far more in keeping with our ideas of the animal kingdom than the megatherium, the ichthyosaurus, or the pterodactyl, to say nothing of the many other monsters with the monstrous names."

They walked along the gallery beside these marvellous decorations, and then descended by a stairway into a triangular Court with a very high roof, and walls also of painted sculptures in high relief. But Arthur did not observe any of the designs immediately; the moment that he had reached the last step of the covered stairway he gave a cry that sounded like a cheer, for he found himself standing in the sunlight. It streamed through the Court from an opening in the roof, and its effect upon the man who had been immured in the darkness of the sepulchre-temple for ten days was like that of the sight of a well of sweet water upon the desert traveller.

He gave a cry, but in another instant he started back, for he perceived that the Court was full of men. Some were standing together in groups of three or four, others were lying down with their hands clasped behind their heads, or with their heads resting on one of their hands—they were indeed in all attitudes, and all were rigid—silent—motionless. The place was a hall of sleepers.

Chapter VIII

THE doctor stood at the foot of the stairway watching the face of his friend. He saw upon it a variety of expressions. Hampden was shading his eyes with his hand, for the light into which he had come so suddenly had dazzled him. The expression of wonder on his features was succeeded by one of awe. The silence in the place was deathlike. The figures seemed frozen in death, and yet there was no suggestion of death upon any faces that were scrutinized by Major Hampden. The silence was almost appalling, because it was so unnatural. The hum that one expects to hear on coming suddenly upon a multitude of people—the various sounds that indicate life even in a multitude of sleepers—were absent. The silence was deathlike, and it produced a visible impression on at least one of the visitors to the place.

He spoke in a whisper—the whisper that one associates with a chamber of death.

"Are they asleep or dead?"

"Determine for yourself," said Dr. Sefton, gravely. "Even if they are dead, you are not acting irreverently in respect of them. Determine for yourself."

Hampden went forward. He stood above two of the figures that were reclining on the floor. He saw that their features were not of a modern Egyptian cast. They appeared to Hampden to suggest the Afghan type, though possessing far more distinction in every detail than he had ever witnessed among the Afghan races or indeed any people, Oriental or European, whom he had seen. Dignity, calm, intelligence was on every face at which he gazed in turn within this triangular court.

A considerable space, elapsed before he put down a hand to the hand of one of the reclining figures.

The hand that he touched was cold as death.

Illustration:
The hand that he touched was cold as death

"They are dead," he whispered, returning to Sefton. "They are dead. It is a Court of Death."

"On the contrary," said the doctor, gravely, "the name that it bears is the Court of Life."

"Why that name?"

"That is the mystery."

"Not merely a mystery, but *the* mystery?"

"Even so—*the* mystery."

"But they are all dead?"

"Did you not put your hand upon one? Was it not the coldness of death that you felt?"

"Undoubtedly. It is not likely that I should be deceived."

"So I should say. And yet I discovered that the place was called several thousand years ago, the Court of Life. It is referred to in some passages in the Egyptian Book of Death which was old when it was studied by Moses. Perhaps Moses was acquainted with the secret of the references. It is also touched upon by the Arab poet who sang the song of Job. Every theology that had its origin in the East necessitates a reference to this Court, though its existence can have been nothing more than a vague tradition when the oldest of these theological systems had its beginning. Let us stroll round the place."

"I think that I have done enough walking today," said Hampden. "Intensely interested as I am in this place I think I have seen enough for one day. I fancied that I had quite recovered my strength; but I find that I am still weak."

"You are quite right," said Dr. Sefton: "you have seen enough and walked far enough; but you'll feel no ill effects, I am convinced. Lean upon my shoulder—all your weight."

Hampden took another eager glance around the strange Court with the silent sculptured pictures on its walls, and the scores of olive-skinned figures as silent as though they were sculptures; then he quickly put his hand on the arm of his companion and reascended the stairway to the gallery, passing once again into the blackness of the great Court of the Thousand Pillars. Both men traversed the Court in silence. They did not exchange a word until they had reached the light

that was suspended over Hampden's mattress. Then, throwing himself on his bed with what sounded like a sigh of relief, Arthur said:

"You have kept your promise, Sefton: you have made me acquainted with such wonders as have made me breathless."

"You have seen something of what this place contains," said Sefton. "But I need scarcely say that there is still much within these walls that is worth studying. I shall leave you to think over what you have already seen. Do not neglect your wine."

He went away after pouring out a cup of the ancient wine, which he placed in a small niche in the pillar within Arthur's reach. Arthur had drunk the contents of the cup before he had ceased to hear the light retreating footfalls of his friend. For the first time since he had awakened within the mysterious Temple, his thoughts went into other channels than those in which they had flowed. He was led to think of something that was quite unconnected with Violet Flaxman.

Though he felt greatly exhausted, he did not sleep until several hours had passed, but when his eyes at last closed his slumber was profound, and of long duration. On awaking he felt completely refreshed and far stronger than he had been previous to his excursion with the doctor. Finding his usual draught of milk and a plate of delicately cooked meats in the niche above his head, he made a hearty meal, and began to wonder if it was day or night.

As he thought upon the delight he had felt on finding himself once more in the sunshine, he was seized with an uncontrollable desire to see the daylight again. He became quite impatient at not finding Sefton beside him when he awoke. He wanted to be led back to where he had stood almost dazed with the flood of sunlight that came into that wonderful triangular court and showed him those strange figures—dead, but still having that extraordinary semblance of vitality. How was it that he had failed to ask the doctor how this marvel had been accomplished? How was it that the doctor had not told him without requiring to be interrogated on the subject?

He had some of the petulance of the newly convalescent; but this mood gradually passed away as he reflected upon that marvel—that extraordinary semblance of vitality on the part of the men whom he knew to be dead. As he thought upon them he seemed to see once more around him those dark faces bearing the impress of a nobility of manhood such as he had never seen on any man's face. They were not stern; there was tenderness mingled with the dignity of their features. Tenderness, self-control, intellectuality—these qualities appeared on every face, and over all there was a godlike calm—such an expression as the greatest of Greek sculptors sought to impart to the features, but without complete success, except in a few instances.

The calm of those faces suggested the calm of a boundless ocean—the calm of a summer night—the calm of a mountain peak around which the silent stars circle forever.

As he thought over those faces of men, who, though dead, had suffered none of the disfigurement and decay of death, he found himself pacing the flags between the pillars. And then the thought occurred to him: why should he not make the attempt to find out the Court of Life for himself? Why should he not stand once more in the sunlight that streamed from that roof?

He felt far stronger than he had felt when he had visited the place by the side of his friend, and though he knew how easily he could lose himself in the labyrinth of pillars, he believed that he understood something of the system upon which the doctor had proceeded to the staircase within the distant pillar.

He had simply gone along the avenue that opened up before his eyes when standing so as to get the pillars at one side in a line. With the triangular arrangement of the pillars this could, of course, be managed from various standpoints; but having had the light behind him as a guide, Arthur Hampden had not failed to perceive the direction of the course upon which Sefton had taken him, and he felt confident in his own power to follow it at any time.

He walked on for some distance until he succeeded in getting the vista of pillars right in front of him; he had only to walk straight ahead in order to reach the stairway. He went back to his mattress and took down the lamp from where it was suspended. He would not trust to his recollection or his instinct to guide him.

With the light in his hand, he went down that long vista. It did not seem nearly so long now that it was illuminated, as it had seemed when he had walked through the blackness of its darkness; for he perceived the little gleam of the light in the niche above the stairway long before he had thought of looking for it.

Illustration:
With the light in his hand he went down

He placed his own lamp on the ground, and made straight for the still distant gleam. He reached it and went down the smooth steps into the gallery. He did not now wait to scrutinize the wonderful decorations of the wall, but hastened on to the stairs which should take him into the sunshine for which he had longed with a longing that he could not control. With rapidly beating heart he went down the covered stairway and emerged upon—the blackness of darkness.

He had made his first excursion to the Court of Life at midday, he had made his second at midnight.

Chapter IX

FEELING bitterly his disappointment, he retraced his steps to the gallery—it seemed to be constantly illuminated—and began examining the tinted sculptures. He had not studied more than a very small portion of them before, for the walls and the pillars were covered with them. He felt that he could spend a profitable month among these wonders of the chisel and the brush. What he was most struck with now was the equality in the execution of the various designs. The doctor had said that he supposed centuries had been spent in the production of these decorations; but Arthur, as he examined pillar after pillar and panel after panel, could not believe that such equality of technique—such uniformity of style and thought could be maintained by the many artists who would necessarily have been engaged at the work had it occupied centuries.

As he stood before an animated group depicted on a broad panel, he was struck with the resemblance between the features of the figures on the wall and those of the men whom he had seen in the Court of Life; the features were certainly of the same type and they all wore that expression of godlike calm.

A sudden thought occurred to him: might not the figures in the Court of Life be the work of sculptors?

To be sure, the hand that he touched seemed to him to have not the coldness of marble, but of death, and it had nothing of the hardness of marble; but then his nerves had been unstrung by the strange sight—by the strange sunlight, and he thought it was possible that he had too hastily come to a conclusion regarding the figures.

How was it possible for those figures, if merely so many dead bodies, to retain their natural colour—to show no sign of death's decay? That was what he meant Sefton to explain. No rational explanation was possible; but if it was assumed that the figures were sculptures, no explanation was needed.

He determined to satisfy himself on this point. He went down the stone stairway once again, and for the third time on entering the Court of Life he was overcome with surprise.

The place was flooded with moonlight.

The illumination was somewhat ghostly, but it was powerful enough to show him the outline of the sculptures on the walls—to show him the faces of the occupants of the Court. Clothed with the moon's rays they had more of the semblance of death upon them than when he had seen them in the sunlight.

He paused for some time at the foot of the stairway. The silence was as awful as it had been before. Once again he felt that the place should have borne the name of the Court of Death. He found it impossible to approach any of the figures that were before his eyes—some standing in groups, others reclining or seated on the pavement, the white moonlight revealing with startling vividness the features that were turned towards it, and showing the clear-cut profiles of others. A ray touched the forehead of a tall figure facing Arthur, and shone into its eyes. The eyes, wide and full of light, stared across the court at Arthur's face. He shrank back from their gaze, into the entrance of the covered stairway; but he could not turn away from the spectacle that was before him. He could not remove his gaze from that white-robed figure to whose eyes the moonlight imparted a semblance of the light of life.

As he stood there fascinated, though with no feeling of terror upon him, he became aware of a shadow moving slowly across the walls and the pavement—the shadow of a man's hand. It passed like a small cloud athwart the moonlight on the pavement, and then fled over the walls to the roof.

The figure of the man at whom he was gazing had moved an arm, raising it over his head.

He saw the action. He saw the figure raise another arm and stand for some moments with both hands clasped above his head.

Breathless with amazement at what he saw, he shrank still further into the shadow of the stairway. In an instant the pavement and the walls were dark with moving shadows. They fluttered like flags in a breeze athwart the white moonlight; for all the silent occupants of the court were moving. Those that had been

reclining on the pavement arose; those that had been standing together in groups separated, flitting noiselessly about the Court. Each seemed to be taking up a position in a recognised formation, and like the shape of the Court, like the arrangement of the pillars in the Court of the Thousand Pillars, like the face of each of the Pyramids, this formation was that of a triangle of equal sides.

They paused as soon as the formation was complete, and then Arthur Hampden could hear that they breathed.

He recollected at that moment the marvellous account given by one of the prophets of Israel of his visit by night to the valley where the bones of the armies that had met and slain one another lay white beneath the cold stars of heaven; and of the sudden moving among those dry bones—of the limbs of the dead warriors moving together—of the flesh coming upon the bodies and the fleshless skulls—of the breath of life being breathed into them until the silent valley became alive with warriors, and there stood before the eyes of the prophet an exceeding great army.

Arthur Hampden recalled every phase of the wonderful vision, and he felt that he was watching as marvellous a resurrection. He had felt the coldness of death upon the hand of the figure that he had touched in this place, and yet now it had become full of life.

The men—they numbered possibly some hundreds—had their faces turned to the inside of the triangle. Their heads were bowed for a few moments and their hands were clasped over them. Then they lifted up their eyes and their hands fell to their sides, not suddenly or regularly, but naturally. All at once Arthur became aware of a low chanting voice—it was not much louder than a whisper and it was as strange as it was sweet. He saw the lips of the men moving, but he could scarcely believe that so soft a sound could come from such a multitude. It was a chant in unison, as simple as the sound of the sea heard when one is far from land—as simple as the sound of a great city heard when one is so far away from its centre, that its many voices blend together and make but one soft sound. The chant seemed to the one listener to resemble this blending together of the voices of many men.

It was in a language that he could not understand, though he could understand the music to which it was chanted—the blending together of the voices of all humanity until they go up to the heaven as but one sound.

The next day his friend gave him the equivalent of the words of the hymn. He had found the hymn inscribed upon some of the buried tablets that he was engaged in deciphering.

This was the hymn which was being chanted in the Court of Life that the moon illuminated:

HYMN TO OUR FATHER.

Ours is the voice of the men—the voice of the World,
Speaking to Thee—the children that speak to their Father.
Glad are the children to speak as the Father is gladdened to listen.
Our voices though many, and speaking in different tongues—
The voice of the man, the voice of the woman, the voice of the child—

Are but one in Thine ears and that one is the voice of a child—
Trustful, knowing but little, and striving to learn,
Perplexed through knowing so little, misjudging most things that it sees,
Fancying danger at hand, mistaking its friends for its foes,
Certain of nothing save only the Father knows all—
This is the child, and we are as children before Thee.
Father all Bountiful, we Thy children rejoice to approach Thee.

What are we that our lips should implore Thee for aught?
Shall the water-skin say to its maker "Fill me with wine and not water"?
Thou knowest, Thou givest unasked, Thou givest aright, and we thank Thee.
But whether we thank or complain Thou givest, Thou givest, Thou givest.
We trust Thee, Thou knowest; we know nought, so make no petition.
Whatever Thou givest is right, and what Thou withholdest is right.
Father all Bountiful, we Thy children rejoice to approach Thee.

Why should we fear Thee? Thou art not as man to be wrath.
And who shall say what is sin? The sins of the day-tide
Are the virtues of night-tide. Thou wilt not be wrath at our blindness.
Shall blame be given to the child who walking at midnight has stumbled?
Nay, if we sin in Thy sight, Thy forgiveness is given unasked.
Father all Bountiful, we Thy children rejoice to approach Thee.

Hail, all Hail, we waken and rise up to worship.
Not that Thou askest our worship. Does the potter demand
A voice from the clay that he kneads, to call him, "Lord, Lord"?
But as honour is given to the clay that bears the impress of the potter,
So we Thy vessels are strengthened each hour we draw nigh unto Thee.
We go forth from thy worship and bear the impress of Thy presence.
Father all Bountiful, we Thy children rejoice to approach Thee.

Chapter X

THE chanting of the hymn went on, sometimes rising in volume until its sound rolled through the long Courts of the Temple, and then falling away to the merest musical whisper. The men who took part in this very simple function did not bow their heads as savages do when addressing their Deity; they seemed to Arthur Hampden to recognise the God-like attributes of the One whom they were worshipping, and to understand that He was not like an earthly potentate, punctilious as regards the forms and the attitudes of humility on the part of those addressing Him. When Arthur was made acquainted with the translation of the hymn, his original opinion in this respect was confirmed.

So soon as the chant had died away, the figures performed some symbolic rite, partaking of the character of a mystic dance. Now and again Arthur fancied that he comprehended the force of some of its movements. He fancied that he perceived

in them the germ of some of the emblematic rites that enter so largely into all Oriental religions. The figures moved with ghostlike silence beneath the moonlight, and Arthur, breathless with astonishment, watched them.

Suddenly he felt a hand laid upon his arm from behind. He started and, turning, saw dimly the form of Dr. Sefton on the last step of the stairway. Sefton drew him to his side, and without speaking a word, motioned him to ascend. They went up the steps together and along the gallery until they reached the great Court of the Thousand Pillars. Only when the doctor had put the lamp in its place above his mattress did Arthur speak.

"What have I seen?" he said. "What have I seen? The supreme miracle of Death becoming Life?"

"Even so," said Sefton. "Now you know why it is that I am willing to spend my life in this place. Now you know whether I exaggerated anything that I told you regarding that mystery of mysteries which I said was to be read within these walls."

"If you had told me yesterday that this was the nature of the mystery which you had witnessed, I would have looked on you as mad. My God! those men were dead. I had my hand on one of them—you told me to satisfy myself that they were dead, and I did so. They were dead, I say."

He had leaped up in his excitement and was pacing the pavement, his hands clenched, but quivering with emotion. The doctor was leaning against one of the pillars with folded arms.

At last Arthur stopped in front of him.

"What is the meaning of it, Sefton?" he cried. "Tell me what is the meaning of all that I have seen. The men cannot have been dead after all. I must have been deceived. I was upset—my nerves were all astray through my weakness. Science has its limits."

Sefton made no reply.

"Why don't you speak, man?" cried Arthur again. "Why do you wish to make a fool of me? Tell me how it is all done?"

"How it is done—how it is done?" said the doctor. "Tell you how what is done?"

"Everything. Who are those men whom I have just seen? How was it that yesterday they were cold with the cold of death, and yet tonight they rise from the pavement and move like living men?"

"I cannot tell you. I do not know—yet."

"Then you expect one day to know the Secret?"

"I told you some days ago that I am like a man who stands with his finger on the latch of the door that he wishes to open."

"You hope to discover the Power that in all ages and among all peoples has been called God—the Power to put life into the dead?"

"Not quite that. Sit down, Hampden, and I'll tell you all that I know—all that I hope for."

Hampden seated himself on the camel's-hair mattress; the doctor had already taken his place on one end.

"Those men whom you saw yesterday and tonight are the High Priests of Hevoth, and they chanted the Hymn to Hevoth. They do so at intervals, and so far

as I have been able to gather, they are governed by no rules as to their times of worship."

"Are they living men or are they dead?" said Arthur.

"You are as capable of judging as I am," said Sefton. "Was it the flesh of a living man that you touched yesterday? Was it the voice of dead men that you heard tonight? Hampden, there is no limit to the mysteries of God. The mystery of the Last Resurrection in which we all believe, is certainly no more wonderful than that of which you are a witness tonight. The sons of God who walked upon the earth in the early days, brought with them the secret of the renewal of life straight from their former abode—call it heaven. For some thousands of years on this earth the average life of a man was something between eight and ten centuries—we spoke of that a few days ago. The secret of this renewal was naturally a very precious one. It was committed to the custody of the High Priests of Hevoth, and it was inscribed by them on their books of stone and deposited in this Temple of theirs. It was also deposited within a chamber over which the figure known as the Sphinx looks across the sands, wearing that expression of secrecy which all men interpret aright, but the exact significance of which none have succeeded in fathoming."

"And yet the secret was lost?"

"It was lost—how, it would be difficult to tell. Perhaps a race of barbarians swept down upon this region slaughtering and making captive the inhabitants. What chance would the people of Ai or Jericho have of preserving a precious secret after the Israelitish invasion? It seems incredible to us how all the great temples of this region became embedded in the sand—how it should be left for the Englishman Layard to excavate palaces and temples that were once among the world's wonders. But Babylon and Luxor and Thebes were of mushroom growth compared with this Temple wherein the Secret of Life was deposited. At any rate the secret was lost; but there can be no doubt that memories of it remained. The custom of embalming the dead had its origin in a faint recollection of that secret. It was the sham renewal of life that the Egyptian priests practised, just as they did sham miracles in imitation of those that Moses was able to perform. The search for the Fountain of Perpetual Youth was the result of another memory of the Secret. It stimulated research for many ages. Above all, the Egyptian Book of Death and the Hebrew Bible bear evidence on many pages of having been compiled by writers who were familiar with the tradition of immortality, or at least of the renewal of life."

"It seems incredible that such a secret should be lost, especially as you say that the priesthood of Hevoth has never been extinct."

"It is by no means incredible. Why, think how little we know even of comparatively recent history! You have seen the cone-shaped towers that are to be found in many parts of Ireland. No one can tell why they were built. You have seen the monoliths at Stonehenge and in Brittany. How many theories have been framed to account for their origin? It may seem incredible that the origin and the use of those monuments has become a lost secret. Has any reasonable theory yet been advanced to account for the origin of the Pyramids? A great scientific authority wrote a book suggesting that they were built to determine the exact position of the Polar Star, or something equally ridiculous. Their secret has been lost, Hampden. I cannot prove my hypothesis regarding them and the Sphinx; but

at all ages a type of life was a flame, and, as their Greek name denotes, the Pyramids were built to suggest the rising of a flame—the symbol of life. Then you know the Greek fable of the enigma of the Sphinx. Here you have the type of the life of man once more. I am not likely, however, to rely on theories such as these; I merely mention them in connection with the question of the loss of the Great Secret, which seemed to you incredible."

There was a long pause before Hampden said:

"You are a doctor, have you ever examined those men whom we saw tonight? Is there no vitality in them at times? Were they dead yesterday when you led me to them?"

"When I first came upon them," replied Sefton, "I believed them to be dead. Every test which I applied to them indicated that they were dead. For three days I believed that I had discovered the most perfect system of embalming ever known in the world. I believed that the words on the papyrus of the Book of Death which suggested immortality, referred simply to this preservation of the body from the decay of death. But one day I felt the flesh that I touched with a finger become warm in life. I watched the gradual appearance of every sign of life in the body. It stood up before my eyes a living man."

"Do they merely recover in order to go through their devotions?" asked Arthur. "Do they lie as dead men at other times?"

"The life returns to them at intervals, the duration of which is governed by a law of which I have no conception," said the doctor. "When they arise they perform their act of worship, and are for the time being—sometimes hours—sometimes days—as living as you or I. They go about the Temple as ordinary men—some of them have been by your side—they eat and drink, they till the ground, they grow their vines and other fruits that they need. The Arabs regard them as a distinct tribe. The tradition is that they helped the Prophet when he was sorely in need of help, and he commended them to his followers. Several of them have been seen by English enthusiasts—one of these enthusiasts wrote a magazine article upon them announcing his discovery of them as representatives of the missing tribes of the Children of Israel. I believe that the Mandaya—the star Worshippers of the Euphrates—are survivors of the original Hevoth-Worshippers. They claim, you know, to be descendants of the Chaldaean Magi, who undoubtedly possessed the key to some of the mysteries of the priests of Hevoth."

"You have talked with the men in the Court of Life?"

"I constantly talk with them in modern Arabic, but their hymn is in that ancient tongue in which the records that I am deciphering are written. They unfortunately know nothing of the characters."

"Sefton, do you believe that they really die at intervals? One has heard of suspended animation."

"I have the stone documents to guide me. I know now that, although the change which we call death came upon them once, they were released from its hold, just as any human being may be, if I succeed in opening that door upon the latch of which I have my hand. The prophecy has been made. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is Death. The same Power that has given the gift of life to those men, will be available to all the world if I succeed in my work—if I succeed in deciphering the secret that has been hidden for thousands of years. Now you know

all there is to be known regarding the work over which I am spending my life, and it is from this you are willing to fly. Stay with me—stay with me, Hampden. Share with me the glory of this conquest—the greatest that the world has ever known—the greatest that it ever will know. Share with me the glory of destroying the world's Enemy."

He spoke passionately. His voice was the voice of a man whose eyes are full of tears. Hampden had a sudden impulse to put his hand in that of his friend and swear to remain by him in that place, shut out from the world—shut out from the joy of living in the world—that the world might be given that gift of life which had been its original heritage. But at the critical moment there came before his eyes the face of a girl...

The hand that he was about to offer to his friend he laid upon his friend's shoulder.

"My dear old comrade," he said, "I believe in you and I believe in your mission. You may accomplish it; but the glory of its accomplishment is not for me. The aim of my life is humbler."

"A girl's kiss?"

"Even so."

"And you are content to throw away every consideration—every aspiration for that?"

"I have no other consideration—no other aspiration."

Dr. Sefton took a few steps away—he seemed in the act of departing.

"Rodney, old friend, you won't go away in that fashion," said Arthur.

There was a long pause before Sefton walked back, and held out his hand.

"I don't blame you," he said. "I would not blame you even if you were to call me, as nearly every other man in the world would, a dreamer of dreams—a vain enthusiast on the border of lunacy. What man ever yet did anything for his fellowmen without first being called a madman?"

"I believe in you with all my soul," said Arthur. "I believe in the truth of your theories. Man, how could anyone see what I have seen since coming here, without feeling as certain as I do that you are pursuing, not an unsubstantial vision, but a solid truth? You will succeed—you will succeed."

"Yes; I think I shall," said Sefton. "But you—will you succeed in the enterprise that you have at heart? And if you succeed will the end be a success? There is nothing more to be said. You will be strong enough to leave here in three days. The trip up the river will complete your convalescence. Good night."

He went off before Arthur could say a word. What more was to be said?

Chapter XI

ON the evening of the tenth day after this little scene within the Court of the Thousand Pillars, a young woman was seated in closer proximity to a man than is regarded consistent with a casual acquaintanceship, on a balcony overlooking the palms and fountains of the great caravanserai at Cairo. Through the violet dusk there floated up to the window the sound of a band mingled with the sound of the

voices of the many sojourners who were smoking all sorts of tobacco, whether chopped in the form of cigarettes, or rolled in the form of cigars, in the comparatively cool space below.

"Why should we not get married here tomorrow?" the man was saying to the girl—his lips were very close to the ear into which he spoke.

Illustration:
„Why should we not get married here tomorrow?"

"Nonsense," said she. "We shall get married when we return home in due course."

"What has the sentiment of home got to say to it?" said the man. "If it comes to that we are at home here; Cairo is all but a British colony."

"Don't say anything more about it, my dear Paul," laughed the girl. "Above all, don't say anything to my father about the advisability of our getting married anywhere but in front of the altar rails of a Church of England in England with a Dean—not a rural Dean, mind, but the real thing—at the other side of those rails. Besides, my dearest, think that it's only a month since—"

"Since my poor brother was murdered by those infernal ruffians? that is what you mean," said the man, in a voice lower and graver even than that in which the girl had spoken. "Poor Arthur!" he continued. "Would he ever have asked you to marry him, I wonder, Vi. I fancy he had more than a friendly feeling for you, dear."

"I don't think he ever was so weak," said she. "At any rate, I never gave him any reason to fancy that—"

Here Violet Flaxman uttered a shriek and clung to the man beside her.

The people sitting among the palms below, turned their eyes upon the balcony whence the shriek had come, and saw, by the light of the lamp in the room behind the balcony, the tall figure of a rather gaunt man standing silently at the half-opened window at the side of the girl who was now looking up to his face with every sign of terror on her own. The man to whose arm she was clinging was also staring at the other.

"The old sad story, I suppose," said a Frenchman, at one of the little tables below, knocking the ash off his cigarette. "The usual *comédie à trois*: the husband comes upon the erring wife by the side of the one who is not her husband. If the husband is an Englishman he will take the guilty ones before his Lord Mayor and get his divorce; if he is an Italian he will stab them both with a stiletto; if he is a German he will accept an apology."

"And if he is a Frenchman?" suggested one of the audience.

"I cannot say what then," replied the other. "There is no precedent in history for the wife of a Frenchman behaving indiscreetly."

Then the people seated around the palms and aloes saw the tall, gaunt man offer his hand to the young woman and then to the man to whom she had clung when that figure had appeared before her eyes at the window opening upon their balcony.

"P'chut!" said the Frenchman. "There is no comedy or tragedy after all."

That was just where he was wrong.

"Good God!" said the man who took the hand that his brother held out to him. "Good God! Arthur—alive? Then those rascals—"

"Didn't cut my throat. Yes, I'm alive. I'm afraid that I startled you, Miss Flaxman," said Arthur Hampden.

"We thought that you had been murdered by the Arabs," said Miss Flaxman, weakly.

"Yes; your boatmen returned with a cock and-bull story of your having gone ashore one evening and failed to return to the boat," said Sir Paul Hampden. "The government have been pretty active—I will say that for them—in trying to get news of you. But, you know, a month is a long time to be missing even in these parts, Arthur."

"It is—it is," said Arthur.

"Yes; a good deal can happen inside a month, old man."

"A good deal."

"Yes; you see, Violet here—well, it didn't take a month to bring us to know one another, did it, Vi? You come in good time to give us your blessing, Arthur."

"I am glad of that. It was worthwhile recovering from the ugly knock that I got from a band of Bedouin robbers. I am glad that I was spared to offer you my congratulations, Paul—and may I offer the same to you, Violet?"

"You are very good," said the girl, in that low voice which is so excellent a thing in a woman, and which is never more appropriately employed than when she is accepting the congratulations of a man whom she has thrown over in favour of an elder brother with a title. "You are indeed good. I thought my father was in the room. He usually has a doze after dinner. You didn't see him as you came through, Mr. Hampden?"

"I'm afraid I hurried through the room," said Arthur. "I was only anxious to see you—and Paul."

"Oh, never mind, I shall find him for myself," said the girl. "You are sure to have a great deal to say to each other. You are looking very pale, Mr. Hampden. I hope nothing has occurred to make you feel unwell."

"Oh, no—no—nothing—only a blow," said Arthur.

"Oh! a blow?" said she.

"Yes; a blow on the back of my head," he replied.

"I'm so sorry. Did you try Pennecuick's Embrocation for it? They say there's nothing so good as Pennecuick's Embrocation." And she went with a smile through the half-opened window through which Arthur had come a few minutes before.

There was a little pause, when the two brothers were left together on the balcony.

"Arthur, old man," said Paul, "I can't tell you how I feel at seeing you again. We had given up all hope of you. Tell me what happened to you. You've come back in good time. I'm trying to persuade Violet to name an early day for our marriage. She made your—your absence an obstacle when I mentioned the matter to her just now."

"I'm afraid that I overheard a word or two as I came out here," said Arthur. "Did you? How she cried out! I don't blame her. When I looked round and saw you I could scarcely keep from shouting out myself. How those infernal foreigners nudged one another and leered as they looked up—I saw them. I'd like to have a

chance of breaking their heads. Never mind; you've come back in good time, I say, for I want you to see me through this marriage business."

"I'm sorry that I must tell you not to count on me, Paul."

"Oh, nonsense! Why, man, you don't bear me any malice?"

"Bear you any malice? My dear Paul, what can you possibly mean?"

"Well, I had a notion, you know, that you and Violet—"

"Oh, Paul! I and Violet?"

"Well, it was my notion."

"But surely Violet would tell you that—"

"Oh yes, yes; she said, of course, that absurdity could go no further."

"Ah, she said that? Well, there you are, you see. Where's your notion after that?"

"Where indeed? But why do you say that we mustn't count on you in this business?"

"The fact is, Paul, that my life was saved by Sefton—Rodney Sefton; you remember him?"

"Of course. His wife—"

"She did, and he has been working away at deciphering some very ancient stone inscriptions ever since. I've been with him for the past month, and I've come to believe with him that there's nothing worth talking about apart from those inscriptions, so I return to him tomorrow."

"Great Lord! Egyptian inscriptions! That's what you have sunk to? Well, if anyone had told me a month ago that you would have gone off on that particular tack, I'd have laughed."

"So should I; but the fact remains the same. Oh, a month is quite long enough to bring about the greatest change in any man—or woman."

"Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics! Moabitish stones! Shapira manuscripts! Don't you know as well as I do that they're all infernal swindles? You're off your head, my lad—that's what's the matter with you. You say that you got a knock or two up the river?"

"I've recovered from that. I think you'll find me sound enough so far as my head is concerned. I fancy, too, that there's not much the matter with Rodney Sefton."

"Of course there's not much the matter with him. But would he have gone into that groove if his wife hadn't jumped the traces? Not he. I could understand a chap who had made a bad bargain in the wife way, or who had been thrown over by a girl; but for you—"

"I'm going to bed. I'm about done up, and I've to start early tomorrow. I want to have a chat with you about that money of mine. Of course you know that, coming in contact, as I shall, with a good many unmitigated rascals of Arabs, a man isn't quite as safe as he would be at home."

"Oh, hang all chats about money! You're far from being all right, Arthur. Don't go to bed yet."

Arthur shook his head. But all the same he did not go to bed just then, for General Flaxman, accompanied by a friend, who commanded a regiment in the British army of occupation, appeared on the balcony and hastened to congratulate Arthur upon his return, after being regarded as dead. They insisted on his giving them a circumstantial account of his rescue, and more than an hour had passed before he succeeded in freeing himself from their questions, and found himself in

his bedroom looking at the haggard reflection of his features in the glass and thinking some very bitter things about women.

* * * * *

And that was how it came about that Arthur Hampden, stepping ashore from a Nile steamer a week later, put his hand into the hand of Rodney Sefton, who was waiting for him on the bank, and said:

"There's nothing to stand between us now, Sefton. It's not much that I can do to help on your work, but whatever I can do you may depend on my doing with all my heart and soul."

"Thank God!" cried Sefton. "Thank God!"

"Yes," said Arthur. "Thank God!" There was a long pause before he looked meditatively at the river of Cleopatra and said, "Rodney, women are—"

"They are, they are," said Rodney, "I should know: I was married to one."

PART II

Chapter I

"IF a man whose wife has run away from him and taken up with another man, fancies he has seen the last of her, he finds out his mistake sooner or later."

This grim enunciation came from Dr. Rodney Sefton, who was seated at a table facing his friend, Arthur Hampden, in the dining-room of the Parthenon Club in Pall Mall. A year and a half had passed since that day when he had interrupted Arthur's definition of women with the suggestion that it was unnecessary, as he had had sufficient experience of one to enable him to dispense with any technical definition of even so interesting a form of life.

"And yet the conditions of such a case as you seem to have in your mind make it very desirable, I should say, that the husband should have seen the last of her," said Arthur.

"Truer words never were spoken," said Sefton. "Now, who could have told her that I was back in England for a month?"

"She may take in a halfpenny paper," said Arthur. "Every reader of a halfpenny paper has long ago been made aware of the fact that Dr. Rodney Sefton, whose name came so prominently before the public in connection with the Nile Expedition some years ago and who, it is understood, has recently been engaged in the work of excavation in Egypt, is at present in England."

"I saw nothing of that announcement," said Sefton.

"That was probably because you do not read the evening papers," said Arthur. "I saw it, however, and in one paper it was accompanied by some curved strokes and a smudge or two, which purported to be your portrait. It might have been anything—a diagram of the new route to the North Pole—a bacillus seen through a microscope."

"Where the mischief did they get a portrait of me?"

"Did they get one? Well, perhaps they did. There was nothing to hinder them getting a snap-shot. In these days of half crown cameras no one is safe."

"Anyhow she discovered that I was in London and I find a letter waiting for me here when I come in to tiffin."

"Suggesting that you should let bygones be bygones?"

"Practically. I wonder should I send her money. I feel that I owe a great deal to her. She did me the best turn that was ever done to me in this world."

"Just as that Bedouin looter did me the best turn that was ever done to me, when he dealt me that blow on the head with his pistol. If I had known all that was to come about from that act of his I think I would have let him keep my watch."

"And what about the young woman, Arthur? Have you forgiven her yet for the way she treated you?"

"I have simply thought nothing about her. She acted according to her lights. I never blamed her. I shall meet her next week as a sister. Queer, isn't it, that for the past eighteen months neither of us exchanged a word on these topics?"

"Not topics, Arthur; it is only one topic—Woman."

"All right, make it one topic—but before we are in London two days we begin exchanging notes?"

"There's nothing queer about it. It is a natural result of such civilization as we enjoy. The sooner we get back to our desert the better it will be for both of us."

"I quite agree with you. Well, we have to secure a good squeeze of the Chaldaean cryptogram at the Museum and find if it bears out your theory. If it does, our work will be simple enough. I wonder will you be content if we find the Hevoth tablets in one Pyramid."

"If we are allowed the privilege which I hope to secure, and if Albaran gives us the tablets which I know he has in his possession, we shall go to work on all the Pyramids without delay. You don't shrink from the work?"

"Not I—on the contrary, I am eager for it. How could I be otherwise, knowing as I do, what this confirmation of our past work—*your* work—means to the world? Great heavens, Rodney, I sometimes wonder how we two can walk about London and still keep to ourselves all that we know."

"For heaven's sake don't let yourself get into that line of thought, Arthur." Rodney Sefton spoke in a low, earnest tone, and a note of apprehension was in his voice. "Have we not agreed that we know nothing until we have proved what we already know?"

"I agree with you certainly," said Arthur. "But at the same time in my own mind there remains no doubt whatever on this matter."

"During the past year we have somehow changed places," said Sefton: "it was you who were for evermore urging upon me not to allow myself to be too hastily carried away with the result of my discovery of that important key to the new series of tablets; but now I find myself imploring you not to allow your enthusiasm to make you blind to the fact that we have only taken one step along a very perilous path."

"Only one step; and yet the end is clearly in sight."

"It is by no means in sight. What, man, do you suppose that you will be able to overthrow in a moment the most settled of all the convictions of the world? Why, the attempt to do so would be sufficient to get you committed to a lunatic asylum!"

"There never yet was a great discovery made without some people trying to commit the discoverer to a lunatic asylum. There are people perishing every day around us—"

"As they have perished for some thousands of years. My dear Arthur, you lack only one qualification of the true investigator—namely, caution until the end is in sight."

"But the end is in sight."

"Then keep it in sight. That is my last word."

Arthur Hampden laughed, saying, "Don't fancy for a moment, Rodney, that I am not in complete accord with you in this matter of caution; but the fact remains the same—"

"The only fact that I am disposed to recognise at the present moment is the tiffin that is waiting for us," cried Sefton, "Come along and eat. We have some business before us. Modern civilization has its advantages, and the meal is not that one which is least deserving of consideration. The kid of the goats is all very well in the desert, but here I prefer something of a more delicate flavour."

They went in together to the dining-room, and no further remark was exchanged between them bearing, however remotely, upon excavations, discoveries, or revelations. Arthur remarked incidentally on sitting down to the table, that it was rather odd he had received no letter from his brother Paul in reply to the one which he had written to him immediately on arriving in London. Dr. Sefton naturally suggested that Sir Paul Hampden was most probably still abroad. The month was only April, and it was unlikely that he was at Avonhurst Castle, his place in Somerset, or he would have replied to Arthur's note, in spite of the fact that Arthur had not written many letters to England when up the Nile.

Arthur agreed with him, and expressed the hope that Paul would return before he himself set out for Egypt again.

Chapter II

IMMEDIATELY after lunch the two friends drove in a hansom to Charing Cross and took the train to a certain village in Kent, an hour-and-a-half from London. Arriving there they walked to a house which was picturesquely situated on the side of a somewhat shallow valley. The hall door was opened by a man who was, as Arthur perceived in a moment, an Algerian Arab. (In the Kentish village he was invariably alluded to as a Japanese).

Dr. Sefton said a few words to him in his own dialect of Arabic, and although at first he did not seem disposed to give a hearty welcome to the visitors, yet after a few further words with the doctor, a marked change came over him. Bowing to the ground, he led the doctor and Arthur into a large room at the end of the hall, and with another bow, disappeared.

The room was an extraordinary one to find in a house in a Kentish village. It was in every respect an apartment in a high-class house at Cairo. The furniture, the hangings, the ornaments, the decorations—all were Egyptian. There was not a discordant element, and in this respect it differed from all the "Oriental rooms" that Arthur had ever seen in connection with English houses, most of which had been furnished with but the vaguest knowledge of the difference between Malayan and Arabic art.

Arthur looked round the room with unaffected admiration for some time. He had just called the doctor's attention to a wonderful piece of embroidery, when he gave a start. A man was standing at the upper end of the room, his head framed as it were by a Moorish arch, silently observing both the visitors. He was a man the cast of whose features strongly suggested the type of countenance that belonged to

the priests of Hevoth. His face was about as olive as a Persian's—scarcely so dark as some Italians' faces—and it bore that look of ineffable calm which was the most striking element observable on the faces that Arthur Hampden had seen with the moonlight upon them—and many times afterwards—in the Court of Life.

He came forward a moment after Arthur had noticed him, and greeted Dr. Sefton with great cordiality, though not effusively; and then the doctor, changing his Arab dialect for English, introduced Arthur, calling him his colleague.

"You have done wonders, I hear," said the man also in English, and with no perceptible accent.

"We have done something," said Sefton, "and we come to you to obtain the material for confirming and consolidating what we have discovered."

"The Court of Life has yielded up its mysteries to your eyes," said the man. "The Inner Court of the Almighty Hevoth has given you its secrets, and yet you come to me."

"We come to you, Albaran, because it is in your hands that the missing tablets were placed."

"That is true," said the man, whom he had addressed as Albaran. "But it is in my power to keep them forever hidden from the eyes of man."

"Is it in your power, Albaran?" enquired Sefton, holding out his hand for the man to grasp.

With only a moment's pause Albaran put forth his hand. He touched the doctor's, but only for a second. Then he turned and strode toward the hangings of the doorway where he had stood when Arthur had first seen him. He retraced his steps when he had taken seven across the room.

"I have still the power to withhold the message," said he. "But I will not exercise my power. Have you considered the whole matter?"

"We have considered it," replied the doctor.

"You believe that it will be a blessing and not a curse?"

"We have considered it."

"You have taken it upon you to say that Life is a greater blessing than Death to the people of the world—the people whose hours of suffering may be numbered by the thou sand?—you would make those hours into years?"

"I would prolong their thousands of happy hours into years," replied the doctor. "Have you considered the matter?"

"I have considered it."

"Then you shall have all you ask for." The man left the room.

"The last link—the last link," said Rodney Sefton, laying his hand on Arthur's shoulder. "Tonight will see the chain complete."

"Strange, isn't it, that the work which you began nearly seven years ago in that buried Temple should have its completion in a house in a village of Kent?"

In a short time the man whom the doctor had addressed as Albaran re-entered the room, and handed to him a small but heavy box bound with brass and with a brass handle to make the carrying of it easy. In the act of handing it to the doctor, he said some words in a tongue that Arthur had never heard before. Dr. Sefton himself gave a start when he heard those words. There was a long silence before he spoke in the same tongue, and in a low voice. Arthur saw that his face was pale

and that his hands were trembling. He gave every sign of being under the influence of some great emotion.

Illustration:
In the act of handing it to the doctor

After another long silence he laid down the box and gave both his hands to Albaran.

Albaran did not speak again; but Arthur could hear him give a long sigh—it sounded like a sigh of relief. Upon the forehead of Dr. Sefton there were beads of perspiration. He too gave a sigh of relief and glanced round the room in a dazed way. Then he sat down on a low divan.

The Arab servant entered a moment after wards bearing a tray with coffee and liqueurs in old Egyptian glasses. Albaran began to talk about the charm of the neighbourhood to such persons—and he confessed that he was one of them—as liked placid rural landscapes. He agreed with Arthur when the latter ventured upon the remark that the village was very handy for London.

In less than two hours Arthur Hampden was sitting down to dinner with Sefton at the "Parthenon".

Before they had risen from the table some letters were brought to each of them. Arthur opened the topmost of his three, after puzzling himself for some moments over the writing on the envelope. He glanced down the page of the letter. It dropped from his hand to the floor. He sat there staring at the dessert plate in front of him.

"I'm afraid that you have had bad news," said Sefton.

"She is dead," said Arthur, in a low tone. "She is dead."

Dr. Sefton looked at him for a few moments. He did not like to enquire who it was that had died. He asked himself who the woman was whose death would affect Arthur as he clearly was affected.

In a moment he had succeeded in answering the question.

"Your brother's wife?" he whispered. Arthur was silent. He continued staring at that plate before him. "Poor girl! Poor girl!" said Sefton. "Only married a little over a year. Does your brother write? He must be heartbroken."

Then Arthur looked up with a start. He glanced around for the letter, and picked it up.

"It is written by her sister," he said. "I didn't know that she had a sister. Grace Flaxman—that is how it is signed. Poor girl! This is what I came home for! And I was looking forward to seeing her by the side of Paul. My God I never got such a blow. Pardon me, Sefton; I think I'll take a turn outside for a while."

He got up from the table and left the room.

Somehow Sefton forgot to be cynical just at this moment. He had never seen Violet Flaxman who had become Lady Hampden, but he could feel for his friend who had once loved her. He knew that Arthur had always been attached to his brother, and he knew that Arthur had long ago forgotten that he had ever loved Violet, except as a sister.

It was quite late before Rodney Sefton, in the solitude of his own bedroom opened the box which he had carried with him from the house that he had visited in the afternoon.

Chapter III

IT was long past midnight when Arthur Hampden started from the chair in which he sat in his bedroom—it was also at the *Parthenon Club*—hearing a tap on the panel of the door. He opened the door and was somewhat surprised to find Rodney Sefton standing on the mat outside. He looked pale—paler even than when, in the house that they had visited, he had spoken the word or two in that strange tongue.

"Great heavens!" said Arthur. "You have not been in bed."

"No-no," said the doctor. "I have been occupied. You have not been in bed either. So much the better. May I come in for a minute or two?"

"Certainly. Oh, of course, you wish to speak to me about the box? Rodney, old fellow, don't be hurt, but the fact is I'm not equal to hearing anything about that business tonight. I had no idea that I could be so cut up. I think of my poor brother—that poor girl! Was there ever anything so sad, Rodney?"

"That is what I want to talk about to you," said the doctor slowly.

"To talk about to me?—My God! how white you are, Rodney!" said Arthur. "You are not well. Your nerves—I have some brandy in my dressing-case."

"I'm all right," said Sefton. "Arthur, don't you remember what you said just before you went out. *This is what I came home for*—those were your words."

"I felt it—I feel it still, Rodney. Somehow at such moments as these, one forgets everything and is conscious only of a sense of loss."

Rodney Sefton kept his eyes fixed upon him without speaking for a long time.

"*This is what I came home for*—those were your words," he repeated, at length.

"What do you mean?" said Arthur.

"What can I mean? Man, do you fancy that I have spent my life in the search for something that turns out, when found, to have no greater effect upon humanity than a scientific theory?"

For a few moments Arthur stared at him. Then with a sudden exclamation he caught him by the arm. His face had now become as pale as Rodney's.

The two men stood there in the centre of the room staring at one another. The palace clock chimed the third quarter past midnight.

"This—*this* is what I came home for," whispered Arthur—"*this—this*. Do I understand? Oh, my God, do I understand? No, no: it is a dream, Rodney—we have been living in a dream."

"No, it is no dream," said the doctor. "We have seen with our eyes what no eyes but ours have ever seen for centuries. Do you think that Life is not as much of a fact as Death?'"

Arthur Hampden turned away and dropped into a chair without speaking another word.

Rodney Sefton did not move from the spot where he had placed himself on entering the room.

There was a long silence before Arthur started to his feet suddenly—almost spasmodically.

"Rodney," he cried, "we shall go by the first train in the morning to Avonhurst."

"Why should we wait until morning?" said Sefton. "There is a train to Avonhurst at 1.17—it is a slow train, but slow as it is, it will take us to your brother's place long before the earliest morning train. I dare say we can get a sleeping car if we need one."

"I don't think we'll need one—I certainly shall not for myself," said Arthur. "Whether we have a sleeping car or not, I'm sure that we'll have as much sleep in the train as we would have remaining here. We'll take that train, Rodney. It remains with my brother to decide the rest."

"Yes," said Rodney; "he will have to decide the rest."

He spoke in a low voice, looking steadfastly at his friend, and then turned to the door.

"Rodney!"

Sefton looked round. He saw the expression there was upon Arthur's face.

"Rodney, are you sure? You don't think that we have both been living in a dream?"

"All the people in the world have been in a dream hitherto," said Sefton. "We are not the dreamers; it is for us to awake them."

"You have found the last link today?"

"I have found it. An hour's scrutiny of the tablets which Albaran put into my hands was sufficient to show me all that I needed."

"But you talked about the need for confirmation?"

"And that confirmation is still wanting. Are we to wait for it?"

Sefton stood with his hand on the handle of the door. He watched Arthur pacing the room with his head bent.

"We shall go—we shall go in the name of heaven," cried Arthur, suddenly coming to a stand.

"We shall—we shall—in the name of heaven," said Sefton.

The darkness of the early morning was still overhanging the village of Avonhurst when the two men reached the little railway station after a long and tedious journey. There was no vehicle at hand, so they were compelled to leave their hand-bags in charge of the one porter of the station, and go on foot to the Castle.

Side by side they went along the great avenue of elms until they found themselves in front of the old mansion in which Arthur was born, and in which he had spent the early years of his life. It was an old and very spacious building. Of the Norman Castle of Avonhurst only one tower remained, however, in association with this fabric; but the rest of the building, though of a much later period, did not seem incongruous. The Norman tower had been erected in the early part of the twelfth century, and the remaining portions of the building in the middle of the sixteenth, so that the whole bore the appearance of a common antiquity. Happily the pseudo-classical "wave" of the eighteenth century was not allowed to over whelm the old building. Only in the shrubberies did one find oneself face to face with an unsuspected Greek temple designed by Chambers—that enterprising

Swede who failed to see any reason why the architecture of ancient Greece should not be appropriate to modern England.

Scarcely a word did the two men exchange on the long avenue. Lights were in the windows of one wing of the Castle, and also in the porter's hatch at the side of the great oaken door. The half-mast flag on the Norman tower clung in heavy folds around its pole.

"Rodney," said Arthur, "are we right in coming here?"

There was a long pause before Sefton said reverently, not lightly:

"God knows."

At that instant a faint pearly light seemed to touch the topmost leaves of the great copper beech that stood in front of the Castle. The sky in the east was feeling the influence of the dawn of a new day, and from a meadow that lay beyond the trout stream a lark soared unseen, but not unheard, skyward to welcome the coming light. The passionate song of the bird thrilled the still dark air and fell upon the ears of the two men standing in doubt beneath.

"Listen," said Rodney Sefton. "That is the song of a skylark who believes in the dawn of a new day to the world."

"That is an answer to us from above," said Arthur. "The dawn of a new day to the world."

He pulled the bell handle that hung beside the oaken door. The bell returned a muffled jangle.

Illustration:
The bell returned a muffled jangle

Chapter IV

THE funeral took place the next day. The coffin was carried out of the Norman tower by eight of the tenantry and borne on their shoulders through the park to the church. General Flaxman, who, six months before his daughter's marriage, had taken a small place in the neighbourhood of the Castle, walked by the side of Sir Paul and Arthur behind the coffin in the mournful procession, but Dr. Sefton did not leave the room that had been assigned to him in the Norman tower. He was suffering from a touch of low fever, Arthur explained to General Flaxman, in reply to the General's enquiries, and he did not think that it would be wise for him to venture out of the Castle for some days.

The Church and the churchyard were, of course, crowded with the tenantry and the men employed on the estate. The women were respectfully tearful. The poor young Lady Hampden, who had enjoyed so brief a period of married life, had been extremely popular among all the people of the village, and they mourned her loss sincerely. They were respectfully observant of the features of Sir Paul, and the result of their observation was to convince them that he had not yet realized the measure of his bereavement.

They were, however, inclined to modify their impressions on this point when they saw Sir Paul start suddenly to his feet and hurry out of the Church, with

bowed head and clenched hands, when the rector reached that part of the solemn service which refers to the dust being given to the dust—the ashes to the ashes. Sir Paul indeed started to his feet and actually seemed about to speak, when his brother laid his hand on his arm, and whispered some words to him. They left the church together.

This remarkable incident naturally called for a good deal of comment at the various places of rendezvous in the village. In Avonhurst there was very little public spirit, the organisers of rural agitation were accustomed to declare. The inhabitants—even the shoemaker, from whom better things might reasonably have been expected—shrank from criticising with any degree of severity the actions of their landlord. Still it would have been impossible to overlook what had occurred at the funeral.

For a regular church-goer and a gentleman who had proved himself liberal-minded enough in the matter of fuel in the winter, that sudden departure called for something of the nature of a protest from a considerable number of the men who were present at the Griffin in the evening.

The parish clerk gave expression to the opinion that Sir Paul's act represented a blow struck at the foundation of that decency and order upon which an eminent churchman of the same name had appeared to set consider able store some years back. But the weir man—he had a wife—did not hesitate to attribute the act to a feeling on the part of Sir Paul which was superior to all decency and order. This the clerk considered a very dangerous principle to attempt to establish. There were the words: "Let all things be done decently and in order"—they spoke for themselves, and couldn't be explained away by the most adroit of Free-thinkers—not that he called the weirman a Free-thinker—no; only he'd best look out.

The remainder of the company, who sat on the benches under the great elm at the Griffin, scented a possibly animated theological discussion, imbued with the customary acrimony, and assuming a more compact formation, waited for the development of events. But they were disappointed; for an underkeeper who chanced to be present, having an eye for the innkeeper's daughter, gave the discussion a physical rather than a polemical turn by asserting that any man in the parish—he would be generous enough to go the length of including the next parish as well—who ventured to say that his master had not acted within his rights, would have to face at least one of his master's servants. He admitted being a respecter of The Cloth, but he ventured to remind all present, not forgetting the parish clerk, that the flesh was weak: he might not be able to resist the temptation of practically annihilating someone not remotely connected with The Cloth.

Thereupon the parish clerk, while declining to be coerced, or to recognize the pernicious principle of *force majeure*, expressed his readiness to withdraw anything that might be ungenerously misconstrued, and to order another jug of the very excellent beer that was being drunk; and so this company separated in harmony.

But the women of the village who talked to one another from their doors, took a sympathetic view of the incident of Sir Paul's departure from the church. The look that had been upon his face from the moment that he entered the church had told them, they agreed, that he did not realize what had happened: it was the look of a man whose wife is sick, causing him anxiety until the doctor's verdict is given. It

was not the look of the bereaved husband in whom hope is dead. Sir Paul's sudden departure was the result of his realizing in a moment that the lovely young thing whom he had cherished was soon to be committed to the grave—leastways, the family vault, which was the same in principle, and perhaps—but that was a question—in the matter of comfort likewise.

At any rate the family vault received the coffin, and the tenantry went their ways. The General returned to the Castle with his remaining daughter, Grace, by his side in the carriage. Grace Flaxman was made fully aware of her father's opinion concerning his son-in law's act. It was by no means favourable to Sir Paul.

"Poor fellow!" said the girl, becoming wistful again. "Poor fellow! Oh, think what he must have felt at that moment! I know what I felt—what I feel."

"A man is a man," said the General. "A man in the position of Paul Hampden should set an example of courage—of fortitude—of Christian resignation; but instead of doing so he breaks down. He has greatly disappointed me."

"Poor fellow!" said Grace.

Her father made a single gesture of impatience—no more.

He had had two daughters.

At the Castle General Flaxman had not an opportunity of receiving an explanation of any kind from his son-in-law, the fact being that Sir Paul Hampden did not put in an appearance at all. He sent a message excusing himself, and the bearer of the message was his brother.

The General looked very grim and uncompromising as Arthur endeavoured to explain how Paul found it impossible to see his father-in-law. "The sad rite which he had just attended—"

"Partially," said the General, sternly.

"You will tell him, Mr Hampden, that I can understand him—that I feel for him with all my heart," said Grace.

Arthur looked at her. Sympathy was in her eyes. He put out his hand to her. The moment that her hand touched his he knew that he had acted too impulsively. He did not desire her to feel how he was trembling. Her eyes told him that she had become aware of it, and that she was wondering what sort of nerves he had.

He was indeed trembling. His forehead was moist. When he spoke, his words came spasmodically, and the expression that he wore convinced Miss Flaxman that he was giving no thought to the form of the excuses he was trying to make on behalf of his brother.

She had begged of him to tell his brother that she understood him; but did she understand Arthur? Perhaps she made an attempt to do so. Perhaps she had heard a whisper of Arthur's attachment to her sister before he had taken that trip up the Nile and returned to find his brother engaged to marry Violet.

At any rate she did not fail to perceive that Arthur Hampden was a man of the deepest feeling. His eyes were unnaturally large and his face was haggard. He seemed not to have slept for several nights. Yes, she felt for him as well as for his brother.

"Poor fellow!" she murmured, as she was being driven by the side of her father to Avoncroft—the house which the General had bought in the neighbourhood.

"I lose all patience with you," said her father. "You harped upon that 'poor fellow' all the way up to the Castle, and now you return to it."

"I referred to Paul the first time," said she, "but now I am thinking of his brother."

"His brother?—his brother?" cried the General. "What has his brother got to do with the matter?"

"I saw how deeply he feels poor Violet's death," said Grace. "He had the same wild and anxious expression that we noticed on Paul's face in the church; and when I touched his hand I felt how it was trembling."

There was a pause of considerable duration before her father said:

"Men seem to have changed a good deal since I was a young man. In those days fortitude was among the virtues. We were taught to face the worst calamities without flinching—certainly without betraying our feelings in the presence of a couple of hundred rustics. What respect will those people who witnessed that scene in the church today have for Paul in the future, I should like to know?"

"Perhaps they will understand. I understand," said Grace, in a low tone.

"They will probably understand the truth: that Paul Hampden and his brother are wanting in the best qualities of manhood—fortitude—resignation—submission to the will of Heaven," said the General.

But if General Flaxman was under the impression that the display of grief on the part of the two brothers was unworthy of men professing the ennobling doctrines of Christianity, he had no reason to complain of any excess of despondency on the part of Arthur at least, when he paid a visit to Avoncroft a few days later. It actually seemed that there was a note of elation pervading his conversation with the General and his daughter.

The apology that he now made for the absence of Paul was not marked by any hesitation: it was fluent and almost conventional. Paul had been suffering for some days past from a nervous headache, he said; he was being treated by Dr. Sefton, who thought it would be unwise for him, Paul, to leave the Castle for some days.

"Oh, yes, Dr. Sefton has practically recovered from his own indisposition; he is, however, still very weak from its after-effects," he explained in answer to the enquiries of Grace.

Subsequently Arthur was led to talk with both the General and the General's daughter, about his recent Egyptian experiences, and before he had taken his third cup of Grace's excellent tea, he had succeeded in recovering the place that he had occupied in the estimation of the General previous to that disquieting incident in the Church. When he had left the house the General went the length of acknowledging to his daughter, that Arthur Hampden was a most intelligent man.

He meant by that, it was unnecessary to explain to Grace Flaxman, that Arthur Hampden was a man who agreed with his, the General's, theories regarding the Nile Expedition and the equipment of the Camel Corps.

But what was Grace forced to acknowledge (to herself) before she slept that night?

She recollected her poor sister's having half confessed to her, two years before, that she had a tender feeling for Arthur Hampden.

Before sleeping she felt bound to acknowledge that there was some excuse for poor Violet in this matter.

During the next few weeks Arthur was a frequent visitor at Avoncroft, and though Grace had not been able to account for his note of elation during his first visit, yet for the strengthening of that note during the more recent hours that they had passed together she had no difficulty in accounting. She herself felt considerably elated when he insisted on her promising to write to him on his return to Egypt—for he was about to return to his researches, he explained to her.

He was, however, careful to explain to her also that he did not mean to prolong his stay abroad more than a year.

It was the thought of his return, though he had not yet taken his departure, that caused Grace Flaxman to feel elated.

Chapter V

PEOPLE who saw Dr. Sefton on the day of his departure with Arthur Hampden from the Castle, declared that he more closely resembled one of the mummies, among which it was vaguely understood he had passed the best days of his life, than a human being. The low fever, which had prevented his leaving the Castle for three or four weeks, had plainly been more serious than anyone had fancied. He looked like a man who had returned from the brink of the grave. His eyes were large and hollow, his hair that had been only sprinkled with grey, was now almost white.

How attached Sir Paul had become to him, people cried, on witnessing the parting between the two men at the railway station. While Sir Paul had merely shaken his brother by the hand, it seemed as if he would never let go the hand of Dr. Sefton. One close observer of the scene at the station was ready to declare that tears were in the eyes of Sir Paul Hampden. The accuracy of this statement was questioned in many directions; but whether it deserved credence or not, it is certain that Sir Paul walked alongside the train after it had started, in spite of the warnings of the guard and other officials who had his safety at heart, and that he retained the hand of the doctor to the very last.

"Just as if he had been a Frenchy," said the station-master in his narration of the incident.

His audience agreed with him; and it became generally understood that Sir Paul had somehow acquired the abhorred manners and customs of an effeminate people; though, to be sure, as he had manifested no particular feeling on parting from his brother, people had to admit that there was hope for him still. He had not become so utterly demoralised as to be affected on saying good-bye to his brother.

But before another month had passed, no one could doubt that Sir Paul was a changed man. He did not go abroad as was generally supposed he would. On the contrary, he remained within the seclusion of his home as he had never been known to do before. The Norman tower was by no means the most habitable part of the Castle. The rooms that it contained were octagonal in shape, and their floors were uncarpeted. The staircase in the tower was steep and awkward—very

different from the broad shallow staircase leading from the great hall in the less antique part of the building. And yet it was in the Norman tower that Sir Paul now lived nearly all his time. It was in the topmost room of all that Dr. Sefton had spent most of the tedious hours of his illness, and it was in the windows of this room that lights were seen shining every night since his departure.

The ancient doors of barbed oak that had shut off various sections of the staircase in the old days, had not been moved for many years; but now some craze seemed to take possession of the owner of the Castle, for he gave directions to have them made practicable; and when the work was done, he never went either up or down the staircase without locking the heavy iron bars that crossed the oaken planks, just as his ancestors might have done when the Castle was being subjected to a siege, and its security was dependent upon the oaken doors and the steep staircase.

He took his meals in one of the lower rooms of the tower, but he would allow neither his own personal attendant nor any of the other servants to go beyond the apartment that he had made his dining-room. The only person in the household who had access to the upper rooms was the elderly woman who had nursed Lady Hampden when a child, and who had been living with her since her marriage. Mrs. Goldsworth was her name—a silent watchful woman, much dreaded by the young female servants, whose transgressions could not long remain concealed when she was in the Castle. Mrs. Golds worth apparently discharged the duties of housemaid in the tower wing, mentioning to the housekeeper that Sir Paul meant to de vote some months to "discovering things", and that he did not wish to be disturbed by servants coming and going through the rooms in the tower.

Her explanation was regarded as only partially satisfactory. It was an undoubted fact that one of the rooms in the tower had been fitted up as a chemical laboratory by Sir Paul, and that he had now and again taken fits of experimenting therein; but that he should now have formed the resolution of systematically devoting himself to scientific research seemed altogether preposterous to the people of the neighbourhood. How any man who had his stable full of horses, who had a first-class trout stream flowing through his grounds, who had thousands of pheasants maturing for the autumn shooting, could make up his mind to devote himself to the investigations of science on the chance of discovering something, was incomprehensible to Sir Paul Hampden's neighbours. Why, if he wanted distraction, was he not rich enough to go to Monte Carlo, they enquired? Monte Carlo offered practically unlimited resources in the way of distraction to the average man; but a laboratory…

Then certain whisperings began to be heard not merely in the parlour of the Griffin but in the Rectory drawing-room and on many lawns where tennis was being played as the spring broadened into summer. It was not to be expected that the Castle should be the centre of the summer festivities of the county, Lady Hampden being dead only a few months; but it was surely not too much to expect that Sir Paul would gradually resume his place in society—such society as was to be found in the neighbourhood. So far from sharing in this view of his social duties, how ever, Sir Paul Hampden became more devoted than ever to the seclusion of his laboratory; and declined to receive all visitors, with the exception, of course, of General Flaxman and his daughter, both of whom called occasionally

at the Castle during the month that followed the funeral, and were formally received in the great drawing-room, Sir Paul meeting them with curious alternations of liveliness and gloom. For some minutes he chatted away quite briskly upon such topics as were current in their part of the county, and then suddenly he became distrait, and a casual remark had to be repeated to him before he appeared to grasp its meaning. His thoughts seemed far away; and more than once Grace caught him looking at the time piece on a bracket above her head.

When the General put his hand on the arm of his chair in the act of rising, Sir Paul was on his feet in an instant. He appeared relieved beyond measure at the prospect of getting rid of his visitors; and it is scarcely necessary to say that upon this fact the General commented with considerable fervour while driving home.

Upon two occasions Sir Paul behaved in this way, but upon the occasion of the third visit of Grace Flaxman and her father—the middle of the month of June had just been passed—a marked change showed itself upon him. He had now no intervals of liveliness. He was in a condition of nervous gloom during the quarter of an hour that his visitors remained in the drawing-room. He made haphazard replies to whatever questions were put to him casually, and his eyes were painfully restless. More than once he started violently at an ordinary sound outside, leaping to his feet and asking Grace in a whisper what the sound meant.

"What's the matter with you today?" asked the General as he rose at the expiration of a painful quarter of an hour. "Have you been drinking?"

"No," replied Paul to this thoughtful enquiry. "No, I haven't had anything but coffee today."

"You've got the manner of a chap that's just recovering from a bad attack anyway," remarked the General, who was exasperated into downright rudeness—the rudeness of the "old school." "It should be impossible for a man like you to be nervous unless alcohol is at the bottom of it. You'll have to look after yourself, Paul, my lad. Don't fancy that you can play ducks and drakes with your constitution without having to pay for it in the long run. That laboratory business is not for a man of your temperament. Science and noisome smells are inseparable. Give them both up if you don't want to be thought a fool. Good-day to you."

"Good hunting weather," said Sir Paul, with his eyes fixed upon the timepiece.

The General stared at him and then at Grace.

"Good hunting weather—hunting weather in June!" he said. "Come away, Grace, come away. It's high time that we were off."

For a moment Paul seemed to recover himself.

"I'm afraid that I haven't paid so much attention as I should to what you have been saying," he remarked blandly; "but the fact is that—that—oh, my God, how like your eyes are to your sister's, Grace! Her eyes have the same soft violet grey tinge as yours. How can it be possible for the eyes to look at one with intelligence—love—if there is no soul behind them? That's the problem. Why is not Sefton here to solve it?"

He dropped Grace's hand that he had been holding, and strode to and fro repeating his words rapidly and almost passionately.

The General gazed at him in astonishment, and without speaking for several minutes. He had never before been placed in so ridiculous a position, and he was ready to resent it, so soon as he found words adequate to the occasion.

But before he had got rid of his first exclamation, Grace had laid her hand upon Paul's arm and had drawn him out of hearing.

"My dear Paul," she said, "you have been devoting yourself too closely to your work in the laboratory. You must let papa and me pay you a week's visit. I have a great deal to tell you—a great deal that will interest you, I know. I had a letter from Arthur this morning?"

"I don't want him—I want Sefton—Rodney Sefton," said Paul eagerly. "It was Sefton who told me what he had discovered in that—Temple—the Secret of the Court of Life. Tell me, my dearest Grace, if you think that it is possible for one's eyes to shine in the light of intelligence—to smile, it may be, or perhaps to be full of pathos—such pathos as I have seen in her eyes—unless the soul is behind them?"

"Dear Paul," she said, "you must not give your thoughts to such things. Our beloved Violet is dead. It is for us to be resigned to the will of Heaven. We can do so while still mourning for her sincerely."

"Dead? Oh, yes, she is dead," said Paul. "But what is death after all? Great heaven you cannot believe that the body is stronger than the soul—that the death of the one means the death of the other?"

"I am a Christian woman," said she. "We must not talk about these solemn matters, Paul. I am afraid that you have allowed your mind to dwell too closely upon our great sorrow. It will do all of us good to be together again for a week. When shall we come to you?"

"When—when?" He looked at her with startled eyes. "When? Never! It is impossible—at least just yet. Oh, you don't know what it is you propose, Grace; and I cannot explain it to you—no, not yet."

"Do you expect me to remain here for you all the evening, Grace?" cried the General from the other end of the room. "We have already kept Paul twenty minutes away from his laboratory. That is too long for such an ardent investigator. Perhaps he is on the brink of some great discovery. We must not stand in the way of the march of science. Come along."

"You are most considerate," said Paul. "I'm afraid that you find me a poor sort of host today."

"Oh, no, no, not at all; you do yourself a great injustice," said the General. "Only in future you'll have to play the part of guest so far as we are concerned." His sarcasm was lost upon the man against whom it was directed.

Sir Paul had his eyes fixed upon a miniature portrait of Violet in an ivory frame that stood upon a small French marquetry table.

"The soul is there—there—behind those eyes," he said slowly, as if making a logical reply to the last remark of the General's. The General gave the handle of the door a wrench, and marched from the room. But Grace did not follow him. She hurried to the side of Paul and laid her hand tenderly upon his arm.

But before the words of sympathy which were on her lips could be uttered, there rang through the Castle the shriek of a woman overcome with terror.

Chapter VI

GRACE clutched at the arm on which she had laid her hand.

"Good God!" she whispered, "what was that cry?"

"God knows," replied Sir Paul. "Is it possible that the cry was hers?"

"Hers?—Hers?" said Grace. His hand was on her wrist as he looked toward the open door. His face was ghastly with eagerness.

"Stay where you are, dearest Grace," he said, in a whisper. "I don't want you to die of horror."

"What is it?—oh, for God's sake tell me what it is—what it means," she asked, as she dropped into a chair.

"In a moment," he said. "Yes, in a moment everything will be known."

He hurried from the room, and immediately afterwards Grace heard the sound of voices in the great hall—the sound of voices and the shuffling of feet. She could not control the strange excitement that took possession of her. She rushed to the door and almost into the arms of her father, who was returning to the room.

"What is it?" she said. "What horrible thing has happened?"

"Pshaw!" said the old officer; "have you no nerves, that you allow yourself to be put out by the shriek of an hysterical maid?"

"A maid?"

"A silly fool of a girl. They picked her up on the stairs leading to the tower. She was in a dead faint—she remains in it still; but they've carried her to the housekeeper's room, and I dare say that in half an hour she'll be as well as ever, and as ready for more prying about the places where she's told not to go. What on earth did you fancy that cry meant?"

"I don't know—I don't know. Paul said—"

At this moment Sir Paul appeared and hurried to her side. His face was still pale, but it had lost the anxious look that it had worn.

"My poor child!" he said, "I am greatly concerned about you. It was only a new housemaid. She had received her instructions, but chose to disobey them. I allow no one up the tower stairs. I have reasons—my laboratory, you know, is there."

"But why did she utter that shriek—the shriek of someone overwhelmed by terror?" whispered Grace.

"Heaven knows," said Paul, walking slowly to the bell-rope. "I have rung for brandy," he added, returning to her side. "You have received a great shock, and will be the better for a liqueur."

But Grace struggled to her feet and declared that she had no need of any stimulant. She had been startled, but only for the moment. The effects of the shock had, she said, entirely disappeared, and she was quite herself again.

She went away on her father's arm, Paul following, and helping her into the carriage, but without uttering another word.

One glance with something of terror in it did she cast towards the Norman tower; then with a slight shiver, although the day was warm, she turned her eyes to the park of splendid elms in full foliage.

"Why should you allow yourself to run down like this?" asked her father, sternly. "It is quite ridiculous to find you collapsing because a silly maid cries out about something or other."

"It was quite absurd, indeed," said she; "only a strange thought came to me from the words that Paul let drop."

"A strange thought? What sort of a thought? I always looked upon you as a sensible girl."

"I can't tell what I thought."

"Then it can't have been very definite or you would remember it. That man is gone to pieces utterly. What incoherent talk was that of his about the soul and such-like stuff?"

"I could not understand him. Poor fellow!"

"You have 'poor fellowed' him quite enough, Grace. You said 'poor fellow' when we returned from the Castle on the day of the funeral."

"I remember. What can we do for him, papa?"

"Do for him? What should we try to do for him? Tell me that. We are not responsible for his behaviour that is making all the country-side whisper."

"No, we cannot possibly be held responsible for—for—anything that may happen; still—oh, it is a terrible thing to fancy, but could anyone doubt if his mind is as strong as ever?"

"What! do you suggest that the man is mad?"

The General was staring at his daughter; but she did not raise her eyes to his when he had spoken.

"Not yet," she replied, in a low voice. "No, not yet."

"But you believe that he is within measurable distance of madness?" said her father, in the same tone.

She shook her head.

"I feared something like that," he continued. "No man can shut himself up as he has done without paying the penalty. The man that broods over his grief is a lost man. What can we do for him, dear?"

Grace knew how tender-hearted her father was upon occasions.

"I suggested that we should pay him a visit," said she. "That is what we were speaking about apart from you. He was always very fond of me and I thought that I might have some influence over him."

"And what reply did he make to your suggestion?"

"It seemed to frighten him, and he said with emphasis that it was impossible for us to go to him."

"On what grounds? Did he say why the idea was impossible?"

"He only said that I didn't know what I was proposing. Then you remarked something about my going away and he seemed quite relieved."

"I noticed so much. Even since we called upon him last I perceive a great change in him. When he came out to the hall—I was there before him—after that girl had made a fool of herself, he was as white as a ghost. He looked around him in absolute terror. What did he fancy was meant by that shriek?"

"What—what? Who can tell?"

"Who can tell what a madman's wild fancy suggests to him? Poor wretch—We'll have to pull him through this somehow, Grace. We can't stand by and see him

become a raving lunatic. We'll have to do something. Our first step will be to telegraph to his brother to return without delay. Arthur has, I know, great influence over him, and he has got a good share of sound common sense, although he, too, allowed himself to be seized by that mania for Egyptian archaeology. Yes, we'll telegraph to Arthur this very evening."

Grace did not speak a word until the carriage had reached the house. The General hurried into the room in which he took his after-dinner doze, and which was consequently alluded to as "the study." In most houses it is taken for granted that one cannot enjoy an evening slumber unless surrounded by well-stocked bookshelves.

He was searching for the foreign telegraph forms when Grace entered. He looked up and noticed that now her face, so far from retaining the pallor that had been on it when driving from the Castle, was actually rosy.

"You are all right again, I'm glad to see," said he. "You're not the sort of girl that takes to her bed on being startled. I wonder where the foreign telegraph forms are."

"I have come to tell you that I don't think you will need them just now," said Grace.

"What? Didn't we agree just now that Arthur Hampden should be telegraphed to?" cried the General. "Don't you know what address will find him?"

"Oh, yes; I know so much," replied Grace. "Even if I hadn't known before, I should do so now, the fact being that a letter from him was waiting here for me. He is coming home."

"Bless my soul! That's lucky. Why, I understood that he didn't mean to return for another year. What is he returning for, anyway? Does he mean to throw over the inscriptions?" asked the General.

Grace was silent. Her cheeks became rosier than ever.

"What's the matter with you?" cried her father. "Did he not tell you what was bringing him home so suddenly?"

"Oh, yes; he gave me some sort of an explanation," said the girl, with a little laugh.

"And what was his explanation, may I venture to enquire?"

"Well, papa, dear, he says he wishes to see you."

Illustration:
„Well, papa, dear, he says he wishes to see you."

"To see me?—see me?—me? What! does the man fancy that he'll succeed in getting me to join in his Egyptian craze? He tried that when he was here, but without making much headway."

"It's another craze that he has got now, and he says he hopes to win you over to it."

"What's the new craze?"

"So far as I can gather it has reference to his getting married."

"Great heavens! What have I got to say to his getting married?"

"He seems to think that you may have a good deal to say to it."

"The man's a fool! He may espouse the Queen of the Cannibal Islands for all that I care."

"He doesn't aim so high, papa. But he thinks, that as you are the father of the young person on whom he has set his affections, an interview with you is quite a legitimate aspiration."

She was now very rosy indeed as she stood very meekly before her father, and carefully refrained from laughing at the succession of puzzled expressions that passed over his face, before he fell back in his easy chair with a roar of laughter.

"Will you tell me how it comes that fathers are invariably blind to what is going on under their noses, while mothers are so wide awake that they can see everything—yes, by George, before it actually occurs?" he cried, as soon as he had in a measure recovered from his fit of laughter.

"I know nothing—I'm only a girl," said Grace meekly.

"Only a girl—I dare say; but I'll swear that you are in love with that fellow who made me believe that his whole heart had been transferred to an Egyptian mummy. Now, tell the truth; did that letter which you got just now surprise you?"

"Indeed it did," she cried earnestly. "Oh, I'm not so bad as you believe me to be. The letter surprised me greatly. I didn't expect it for at least another fortnight—perhaps three weeks."

Chapter VII

GRACE FLAXMAN knew perfectly well that her father would not refuse his consent to her engaging herself to marry Arthur Hampden. Although Arthur was only a younger son and would probably never inherit the family estates, he had still a very fair income—quite enough, with the small fortune which had been bequeathed to Grace by an aunt, to start housekeeping on. Of this fact the General was quite aware; and as he had formed a great liking for Arthur during his visit to England in the spring, Grace knew that no obstacle would be thrown by her father in the way of her engagement.

The letter which she had received from Arthur told her that he must leave Egypt in less than a week. He had some business to transact in Venice which would occupy him for a few days, so that it would possibly be a fortnight before he would be by her side—a fortnight from the date of her receiving the letter. This seemed a very long time to face; but she perceived with her usual tact that she had no alternative but to face it boldly, with all its dreariness and emptiness.

She was very much in love with Arthur Hampden, and having confessed so much to her father, they both found that they could talk together much more easily on the subject of Arthur's attachment to her and its probable consequences. The topic of Arthur, in fact, excluded all other topics; and thus or a day or two no word was exchanged between them in regard to Arthur's brother Paul. It seemed to be tacitly understood between the General and his daughter that until the return of Arthur, no step could be taken on behalf of Sir Paul Hampden.

But there could be no doubt that their apprehensions on his behalf were shared by their neighbours. Almost every day brought to their ears some whispers as to

the strangeness of the ménage at the Castle. The house maid who had been found senseless at the foot of the tower staircase, had been sent to her home. She declared that she could not tell what she had seen, when her curiosity had led her part of the way up the tower stairs. People would laugh at her and call her a silly fool, she said; and so she remained silent; but it was certain that her nervous system had received a shock from which it might not recover for several months.

Sir Paul behaved very liberally toward her, it was generally admitted, although the girl did not deny that, whatever it was that had given her the shock on the tower staircase, she had no business to be there. But in a few days it became known that two other servants at the Castle had left also; they had, in fact, run away without even waiting to pack their boxes, and like the young house maid, they declined to give any substantial reason for their action. All that they could say was, that they could not bring themselves to remain in a place where things were going on that they could not understand. When inquisitive persons asked them, "What things?" they shook their heads and replied, "Queer things." Thereupon some persons were ready to declare that the Castle was not a place where respectable people could live; but others did not hesitate to express the opinion that, so many things that the intelligence of a servant could not understand took place at most great houses, the account that had been given of the disabilities of the Castle was not alarming.

This view may have been reasonable enough; but all the same, the opinion soon became general that the servants had good reason for taking flight from their "place."

General Flaxman heard about the action taken by the pair of fugitives, and he did not hesitate to declare that they were idiots, who must have had very little experience of gentlemen's houses if they thought the occurrence of queer things exceptional. But when he got home he shook his head and wished that Arthur Hampden was back from Egypt.

In this wish he was joined most earnestly by his daughter.

After dinner on this day the General smoked a cigar on his lawn and smelt at the roses. But a deluge of rain coming on (as is usual in the leafy month of June in England) he retired to his study—"to read the *Times*," he explained to Grace.

He had not slept for more than a quarter of an hour when the door was knocked at, and he rose to admit the Rector of the parish, the Reverend Algernon Hazell.

"Your daughter told me you were here, and as my business is with you alone, I thought that I might venture to awake you."

"You were quite right, only, of course, I wasn't asleep," said the General. "Will you smoke a cheroot? We'll have coffee in a minute. Good Lord! how solemn you look! What's the matter?"

"I feel solemn," said the clergyman. "I want to have a chat with you about Paul Hampden."

"Oh! Paul Hampden. I suppose you've been hearing some of those foolish stories. I have. Such unintelligible rubbish never came to my ears before."

"The maids were as unintelligible as might reasonably be expected," said Mr. Hazell; "but Vicary has been with me today."

"Vicary? What has Vicary got to say?"

(Vicary was the butler at the Castle.)

"He had got a good deal to say. He was a good deal more intelligible than the maids. Flaxman, I'm afraid that Paul Hampden's mind has become unhinged."

"What have you to go upon? What story did Vicary tell you?"

"A strange one. You are aware, of course, of the existing ménage at the Castle. Since your poor daughter's death Paul Hampden has lived altogether in the rooms in the old tower."

"Yes, I know that. His laboratory is there."

"He has forbidden the servants to that part of the Castle, and has had the old barbed doors on the staircase put into working order. He keeps them constantly locked, as if he expected an assault to be made upon the rooms beyond."

"That's very foolish. Well, is it anything more than a whim, my friend?"

"You are as good a judge on that point as I am, Flaxman. You heard how one of the maids was found senseless at the foot of the staircase a week or so ago?"

"I was in the Castle at the time. She was prying about that staircase as all women will pry about a place from which they are excluded—you've heard the story of one Bluebeard? Well, it's founded on a thorough knowledge of woman's nature. The girl shrieked out. She could not have fallen down many of the stairs."

"She was not injured, at any rate. I heard that she might be prevailed upon to talk to me on the subject of her fright, but I never went near her. Then two other servants ran away. They might also have been ready to chatter; but they did not find me ready to listen."

"Of course not. You were never given to encourage servants' gossip."

"No; but with Vicary it is different. He has been at the Castle since Paul was a child. He would be the last man in the world to start any gossip or to speak a single word that might jeopardise the honour of the family."

"I quite believe that. What did he say to you?"

"I cannot tell you all that he said—the strange hints that he dropped regarding Sir Paul. They point to nothing within the bounds of reason—they are absolutely ridiculous—perhaps impious."

The rector had risen from his chair and was pacing the room with his head bent. The General did not speak.

"I will not try to repeat anything of what he suggested," continued Mr. Hazell, after a pause. "I will only tell you one thing that he told me. Two nights ago he was in the entrance hall, putting out the lamps. The servants had all gone to bed. He fancied that he heard his name called, and he was under the impression that the voice was Sir Paul's, and that it came from the laboratory in the tower. This being so, he did not hesitate to ascend the stairs. He was certain that if it was not his master who had called to him, the lowest of the doors on the stair case would be closed and locked as usual; otherwise the door would be unfastened. He found it open and he had thus every reason for believing that he had been summoned by Sir Paul. He went up half a dozen steps beyond the door, and then he stopped. Flaxman, he heard the sound of three distinct voices conversing in the room in the tower that he was approaching."

"And he recognised each of the three!"

"He affirms that he recognised each of the three. The first was the voice of Paul Hampden, the second was the voice of your daughter's old nurse, Goldsworthy;

the third—" The Rector paused. General Flaxman saw that his face was pale and that his hands were trembling.

"The third—the third?" said the General in a whisper.

"Flaxman, I perceive now that the story is not one that should ever have been seriously repeated. I perceive clearly now that it would be an impiety for me to repeat what that man told me."

"And yet you did not think so when you entered this room?"

"That was my mistake—my sin. Oh, that man Vicary must be insane! His whole story represented the wildest hallucination of a madman."

"I don't think that Vicary is the sort of man to go off his head. But if his story is so wild there can be no harm in your repeating it to me."

"I cannot. You would never have the same respect for me after I had told you that I listened to the man for a moment."

"I will not misjudge you, I promise you, Hazell. Our Church does not recognise the Confessional, but the duty of such a man as you toward his parishioners does not need to be defined. Come; it will relieve your mind to tell me all that Vicary told you: I may be able to advise you what further course you should pursue in the matter."

The clergyman paced the room for some moments, then he seated himself suddenly in front of the General.

"Flaxman," he said in a low voice, "I will tell you this much, and you may be able to gather the remainder without my aid: the first voice that the man heard coming from the room was the voice of Paul Hampden, the second was the voice of Mrs. Goldsworthy; the third was the voice of a young woman."

The General started to his feet.

"You did well to tell me," he cried. "Yes. I am the proper person to hear it, considering how the matter touches the honour of my family. Yes, I can quite understand how you feel on the subject, my dear friend. I can understand your reluctance to communicate so painful a matter to me; but I am glad that I insisted on your telling me all."

It was now the General's turn to pace the room. He did so in silence for some minutes, the Rector watching him with some degree of eagerness.

"Are you quite sure that you have drawn the right deduction from what I have told you, Flaxman?" he said at last, rising from his seat.

"The right deduction?" cried the General. "Undoubtedly, I have drawn the right deduction. Your words are susceptible of one conclusion only. I see it all now. What you have suggested to me accounts for everything that was a mystery before—his sudden flight from the church before the completion of the funeral service—his peculiar bearing in respect of my daughter and myself when we visited him—his command that no servant was to enter the tower—his newly acquired scientific zeal—ah, I see it all now."

"Merciful heavens!" cried the Rector. "Is it possible that you think the thing worthy of credence?"

"Worthy of credence?"—the General spoke warmly, but in a moment he became cool. He smiled sadly as he looked into the mild face of the country parson. "Ah, my dear Hazell, your days have been passed far away from the wickedness of the world. You know nothing of what men are capable upon occasions. But I have

seen strange things in my time, and I have learned to be surprised at nothing that I may see or hear."

"But this—this—this awful thing! Surely Satan must be at the bottom of it!"

"Satan! My dear sir, I've known men who in a matter of wickedness could give your good old Satan points, so to speak I beg your pardon; I forgot for the moment that I was addressing a clergyman. Good heavens! to think that that man, who, I believed, was a devoted husband—ah, my poor child—my poor child! Yes, you did right to come to me, Hazell."

"I believe sincerely that I did, Flaxman. But in the name of heaven, what explanation is it possible to offer for this awful thing? Oh, the whole idea is preposterous! Vicary must have been mistaken. The thing is incredible. To be sure, there is the case of Saul and the Witch of Endor; but we live in a different dispensation now. Still, what was called witchcraft a hundred years ago, we call science nowadays."

"I don't quite see the connection of your allusions," said the General; "but I'm sure that we agree in believing that, however great may be the changes that are daily taking place in the world, the wickedness of man is as rampant today as it ever was."

"And you actually believe that this awful thing has come to pass?"

The Rector's voice had once more sunk to a whisper.

"I only know that it is within the bounds possibility," said the General.

"What! within the bounds of possibility?" cried the clergyman.

"Alas! yes; I have had experience of men in various parts of the world, and I speak as my experience prompts me. But be assured that I shall make it my business to find out the truth or the falsehood of this matter. Consider yourself freed from all responsibility in the business, my dear Hazell. I shall find out everything, you may rest assured, and communicate the result to you without delay."

The clergyman stared for some moments at the old officer who had seen the world. Then he slowly put out his hand and said "Good-night," without another word.

General Flaxman watched him striding away by the side of the laurels, his head bent and his eyes fixed on the ground.

"Profligate and hypocrite!" muttered the General as he thought of all that Mr. Hazell had told him regarding Sir Paul Hampden. "That good man could not believe in the possibility of such vice existing in this neighbourhood. I do not blame the simple soul. Who could believe that the husband of my dear dead child would dare, before she had been three months buried—nay, perhaps one month—to bring another woman into his house—a creature—by God! I shall make him suffer for this gross insult to me and mine."

Chapter VIII

WHEN Grace looked into her father's study to enquire if he would like his coffee to be sent in to him, she found him standing at the window. He did not turn round to reply to her.

"I will drink it here," he said; and she perceived that he had something on his mind, and that he preferred being alone for the present.

She ordered the coffee to be sent to him, and then returned to the drawing-room to read once more the letter which she had just received from a correspondent who dated his communication from Venice. Her bed-time had almost come when her father entered the room to tell her that he found it necessary to go out on a matter of business in the direction of the village, and that as he would probably be detained for an hour or so, she need not wait up for his return.

She was greatly surprised at this departure from his usual course of life. Her father had all an old soldier's attachment to routine. He rose at the same hour every morning, whether the season was summer or winter, and retired every night with equal precision. She felt that the business which he now regarded as sufficiently urgent to compel him to break through his accustomed habit must be of a remarkable character. Having come to this conclusion she was wise enough to make no attempt to find out from him what was its exact nature. She had, however, an idea that it was in some way connected with the eccentricity of Sir Paul Hampden at the Castle. What other matter was there that her father could think worthy of his attention and the sacrifice of at least an hour of his bed-time?

She longed more ardently than ever for the return of Arthur Hampden, and actually felt that she was wholly disinterested in this matter—that it was solely on behalf of his brother she was wishing for the appearance of the man on whom her heart was set.

The soft dusk of an exquisite summer night had gathered when General Flaxman left his own house and took the road leading to the village. Over the church tower a star or two gleamed faintly. From the meadows that sloped down to the little trout stream there came the sound of the bleating of the ewes and the faint pathetic treble of the young lambs. The drowsy cawing of a few belated rooks, the mellow contralto of a blackbird, the barking of a dog in the village—these were the only sounds of the night.

The village was more than a mile away, and before he had walked half this distance, he turned aside into the green lane leading to the Church. He passed through the churchyard, the white slabs and crosses of the tombs being on one hand and the mouldering brick-work and iron doors of the vaults of the Hampden family on the other. He could smell the rich scent of the first roses of the summer which Grace had woven together that very day and laid within the gate that had last been opened.

The perfume of the roses made General Flaxman feel very bitterly in regard to his son-in-law. He stood for a moment among the silent graves and struck his malacca cane against the ground—muttering between his set teeth:

"Profligate!—unfeeling profligate!"

He passed out of the churchyard and got upon the little track which led to a private door in the demesne wall. He had a key for this door and Grace had another. Opening the door he entered the park and went along the narrow

subsidiary avenue leading to the main one that made a bold sweep among the celebrated elms up to the Castle.

The night was very still in this place. No breath of air came to stir the heavy foliage of the horse-chestnuts or the beeches under which he was passing. The musical prattle of the rivulet that joined the trout stream further down the park varied curiously at intervals. Sometimes it sounded like a duet, and then it dwindled away into a thin lisping solo. The shriek of some small animal of the woods that had become the prey of a more powerful, shrilled through the night, and from a remote part of the park came the fantastic whoop of an owl. Then the church clock struck eleven and was followed by the Castle clock.

The General paused upon the great avenue and counted the strokes of the first clock. Again he struck the ground impatiently with the end of his cane, saying:

"What in the name of heaven brought me here?"

He had left his house without having made up his mind as to what course he meant to pursue. He had a vague idea of marching boldly up to the door of the Castle and confronting Paul Hampden, and denouncing him for his profligacy; he felt that the lateness of the hour would only add to the force of his denunciation of the wretch who had not hesitated to insult the memory of his wife before she was three months dead. But the walk through the silent night had caused his purpose to change.

He stood there beneath the heavy boughs of the elms of the great avenue saying:

"What in the name of heaven brought me here?"

He seemed to have awakened from a dream. He now perceived how ridiculous would be his position if he were to go to the hall door of the Castle and arouse the servants for the purpose of denouncing their master in their hearing. The stage tawdriness of such a design was now apparent to him, and he wondered how he could ever have been foolish enough to fancy that his heroic resolution was practicable.

He stood for some time at the junction of the two avenues. Then he turned and began to retrace his steps, saying in a low tone:

"My poor child My poor Violet!"

But before he had walked for more than a dozen yards on his return, he stopped again, and after a moment's thought, faced about once more and strode along the avenue leading to the Castle. His soldierly instincts revolted at the idea of a retreat. He made up his mind to go up to the Castle, though he would not ring the bell. It occurred to him that he might be able to obtain in some way confirmation of the iniquity of which Vicary had accused Sir Paul Hampden. Might it not be possible, he asked himself, to come upon Paul Hampden walking in the garden at this very hour by the side of the woman whom he had secretly brought into the Castle?

The idea appeared to him in the light of an inspiration. Paul Hampden was not likely to remain in his rooms in the old tower during the entire twenty-four hours; nor was *she*. What then could be more likely than their promenading the terraced gardens when the servants were almost certain to be in bed?

His heart beat quickly in the expectation of coming face to face with the wretch who had so grossly outraged every sense of decency. He would make Paul Hampden ashamed of himself, if he was capable of any feeling of shame, and

before a week would pass he would make the whole country aware of his atrocious conduct.

Full of this thought—full of the hope of confronting Paul Hampden and "*that creature*," he walked rapidly along the avenue. But so soon as the Norman tower of the Castle came in view above the trees, he quitted the avenue for the grass. On the grass the sound of his approach would be deadened.

A light was in one of the windows of the tower. This fact became apparent the moment he left the covert of the trees, and he felt more confident than ever that his surmise was correct—that he would come upon the guilty pair on the terrace.

He went along more cautiously than before, now that he was close to the Castle. The air was full of the soft perfume of the flower beds that lined the terraces. He paused for an instant before crossing the smooth lawn, not a dozen yards from the broad, shallow terrace steps. The black mass of the Castle blotted out half the summer midnight sky above him. The whole wide front was in darkness, with the exception of the one window half way up the Norman tower. He kept his eyes fixed upon the illuminated square. Now and again a shadow flitted across the white blind. Once a man's head appeared and remained for perhaps half a minute in the centre of the square. General Flaxman was able to recognise the silhouette. The Vandyck beard and moustache belonged to Paul Hampden. Afterwards there was a confused flitting of shadows, and then for some minutes the illuminated blind was undimmed. Suddenly there appeared upon it a black profile—the profile of a woman's head—it remained but a few seconds, but that space of time was enough. General Flaxman with a cry had fallen on his knees on the lawn, covering his eyes with his hands.

* * * * *

Grace Flaxman, awaking shortly after midnight, heard the sound of footsteps on the gravel of the garden path below her window. She rose from her bed and drew aside the curtain. She had no difficulty in recognising the figure of her father pacing the garden with bowed head.

She hastily threw on a dressing-gown and hurried downstairs. Opening the French window of the drawing-room that led to the garden, she called to her father. He started at the sound of her voice, and then replied to her.

"Dearest papa, you must not play such tricks with yourself," she said, as he came towards her. "You should not be in the damp garden at such an hour. One might fancy that you had never heard of such a thing as bronchitis. Is anything the matter? You have not heard bad news? Oh, my God! is it possible that you received some secret news of Arthur?"

"No, no; no bad news," replied her father. "I merely took a walk—too long a walk—I'm tired, and—what did you say just now about tricks? Ah, playing tricks. Our senses play strange tricks with us sometimes, Grace—yes, and we are fools enough to be influenced by their tricks, contrary to the dictates of common sense and experience. I have been made something of a fool this very night, my dear."

"Then show yourself wise now by coming into the house and going to bed without delay," said she.

"You have seen the silhouette portraits that were so common fifty years ago?" he said, as he closed the French window through which he had entered the room.

Wondering greatly what he meant, and half afraid that his mind was wandering, she thought it better to humour him by taking him seriously.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I have grand-mamma's portrait in a black frame, done that way—the curls at the side of the face are wonderfully suggested."

"Yes; but the man who would venture to affirm the identity of a silhouette as confidently as though it were a highly-finished modern photograph, would be thought a fool, I rather fancy."

"I don't quite know what you mean," she said. "But I'm sure that you should have been in bed hours ago, my dear papa."

"You're quite right," said he. "I only went out to be made a fool of And yet—and yet—by heaven I cannot say that if it were all to happen again I should not feel as I did. It was so like! My God! so terribly like her! I think, Grace, if you don't mind, I'd like a drop of brandy."

"I'll get the decanter for you in a moment," she cried. She was now really frightened about the condition of her father. She had never heard him talk so incoherently before. But when he had drunk a glass of brandy he seemed to become himself again. He talked commonplaces about the night and the heavy dews and the hay-crop, and she was comforted.

She kissed him at the door of his room, and then returned to her bed.

But she lay awake for quite another half hour wondering what he could possibly mean by those references of his to old silhouette portraits.

Chapter IX

GRACE FLAXMAN felt greatly relieved when her father appeared at breakfast the next morning without showing the least sign of having suffered any ill effects from his unusual experience of the night. He laughed when she told him that she had been quite uneasy lest he might have caught a chill in the garden.

"I'm as hard as nails, my dear," he said in response, as he took his cup of coffee from her. "I fancy that you thought me a trifle incoherent before I came into the house," he added.

"I must certainly admit that I did, dear," she said. "What on earth could lead you to talk of silhouettes—yes, the superiority of modern photography to the old-fashioned black outline pictures? Do you intend writing for a Kodak?"

"It's odd what notions come into one's head at night," said her father. "It's odd too, how sometimes a shadow affects one more deeply than the most substantial incident. Whoever sneered at his neighbour for being overcome by a shadow must have had very little experience of men and of life. Never mind. I think I can distinguish between the shadow and the substance now."

"It has usually been your strong point," said she, with a laugh. "That was why I became uneasy when you continued rambling on as you did last night."

"I fancy that the First Offenders' Act has an intimate bearing upon my case," said the General. "I think that I can claim to be leniently dealt with, and I promise you that I shall not launch into a career of crime. Here comes the post bag."

Grace received two letters, and her father several; but only one out of them all called for any remark. This was a short note to General Flaxman from a brother of his who had been an officer of Engineers and had, since his retirement from the Service, taken an active part in the opening up of the African Continent under the East African Company. He had just landed at Southampton, he said in his note, and meant to pay a brief visit to the General before going to London. He was, however, unable to say positively when he might be looked for, so he begged that no vehicle might be sent to meet any particular train for him.

The General had read out the letter to his daughter, his voice falling only when he came to the last paragraph:

"Meantime all love to Violet and Grace. I am longing to kiss their dear faces, though I feel sad to think that I must now play a very second fiddle indeed to Paul Hampden so far as Violet is concerned. The idea of that little puss being Lady Hampden!"

Grace's tears sprang to her eyes. Her father laid down the letter which he had been reading so joyously. There was a long silence before he said:

"He had evidently left for the coast before he received my letter acquainting him with the sad news."

"It will be a great shock to him," said Grace. "He was very fond of both of us, but I think that poor Violet was his favourite. He is looking forward to meeting her here. Alas! Alas!"

"He will feel it deeply," said her father. "Poor George! I know how attached he was to her! What an amusing letter he wrote to her when he sent her his present just a year ago! He will feel her loss deeply." The pleasure that he had received so soon as he had opened the letter and found that his brother George was in England and that he would possibly arrive at Avoncroft in the course of the day, had changed in a moment at the sad thought of the shock that awaited him the moment he would enter the house. The General had been looking forward during several months to the return of his brother, but now he knew that their meeting would be one of pain instead of pleasure.

In spite of his brother's assurance that it would be unnecessary to meet him at the train, General Flaxman made it a point to be present at the arrival of two trains from the South that day. His brother arrived by neither, and the General took it for granted that he would not be at Avoncroft until the next day. He had, however, just gone to his room to dress for dinner when, glancing out of a window, he saw the tall figure of the ex-Colonel of Engineers on the road. He called out to Grace, so that when George Flaxman reached the gate he found his brother and niece waiting to receive him.

He had his right arm about Grace in a moment—the General had to be content with his left hand.

"This is home at last," cried the wanderer. "Bless my soul, old chap, you're as juvenile as ever—liker the brother—well, let us say the elder brother, than the father of that strapping lass. Isn't she a strapping lass?"

"The interior of Africa hasn't made the least change upon you, Uncle George," said Grace. "You were quite as tanned years ago."

"What! has the artless maiden acquired the art of flattery with her other accomplishments?" cried her uncle. "Ah, never mind, I'm not just a wreck yet. Oh,

yes, I'll go inside. My portmanteau is following me from the station. I couldn't catch the through train, but I managed to get one that brought me on at Escott Junction. I hope you didn't send to meet me earlier in the day. I'm not too late for a cup of tea, Grace."

"We'll be dining in half an hour," said the General.

"That will give us plenty of time for our tea first," said his brother. "I'm a tea enthusiast, as you may remember."

He threw himself into an easy chair and in an instant Grace had the kettle-lamp lighted. "You'll have your cup in five minutes," said she.

Illustration:
In an instant Grace had the kettle-lamp lighted

"I'll enjoy it, I can assure you, for I've had a walk," said the traveller.

"A walk? Ah, from the station," said the General.

"Yes; but with a detour through the park," laughed his brother. "The fact is, my dear Grace, I meant that nothing should prevent my seeing both my nieces within an hour of my arrival. So I thought that I should make sure of the doubtful one without delay. I went through the Castle grounds hoping that my usual good luck would stand to me and send me direct to the very summer-house where I had visions of seeing my beloved Violet sitting on this lovely summer evening."

"Alas! Alas!" said the General.

"You may well say 'Alas!'" cried his brother. "My luck deserted me. I was forced to pull that wonderful bell-handle beside the oaken door, and to enquire for Lady Hampden."

"Then you heard—" the General had risen from his chair and had taken a step toward his brother. He spoke in a low tone.

"I heard enough to give me a shock," said the explorer.

"A shock?"

"I said so. What manner of servants has Paul Hampden anyway? You should have seen the way the man stared at me when I asked for Lady Hampden. He seemed scared and mumbled something, which, upon my word, I took to mean that there was no Lady Hampden. 'Is Sir Paul in the Castle?' I asked the man, and he was glib enough in replying to me on that point. Sir Paul was in the Castle, but he is seeing no visitors just at present, I was assured. That was enough for me. I wheeled about without leaving a card, and was marching off in no particularly good humour, when, as luck would have it, I chanced to look back at the old tower, and there I saw her at a window—in the old tower, of all places in the world! Is Violet immured in that prison, I'd like to know. Hallo! What do you two people find about me to stare at?"

There was a long silence before General Flaxman said in a husky voice:

"You saw her—her, you say her? Whom did you say you saw at the window in the tower?"

"Whom? Didn't I make myself plain? I tell you that I saw Violet—Violet—your daughter, my niece, who you wrote to tell me more than a year ago, had married Paul Hampden."

A little cry came from Grace. Her uncle glanced round and saw her sitting on a sofa clutching with white hands at the edge of the small Indian tea table which had been laid beside her. Her face also was white, and her eyes were staring almost wildly at him as she bent forward in an attitude of eager expectancy across the table.

"Good God! What is the matter, Grace? What have I said to make you look at me in that way?"

"George," said his brother, "I wrote to you the sad news by last mail, but I suppose you had left for the coast before the letter reached you."

"The sad news? What sad news?"

"The news of her death, George; my poor daughter died on the twelfth of last April—more than two months ago."

"Violet—dead—nonsense, man! Haven't I just told you that I saw her at a window of the Castle tower? Dead? Great heaven! do you fancy that I have lost the use of my eyes? I tell you, I saw her at that window, and what is more to the point, she saw me. Yes, she waved her hand to me and smiled in her old way. I replied, but only in a half-hearted manner, for I naturally felt hurt that she should be denied to me. In a moment, however, the sight of her face had made me myself again. I turned and made a sign to her that I would go back, but she shook her head as if to prevent my doing so. But I waved her a good-bye and she responded. Dead! Violet dead, you say... For God's sake, tell me that you are not in earnest—that—" he looked from the girl, who was now sobbing on the sofa, to the tall, gaunt, white-haired man who stood with bent head and interlocked fingers in the middle of the room. "They are in earnest," he muttered. "They are surely in earnest; and yet—I saw her—as sure as there is a God in Heaven I saw her. No one need tell me that I was mistaken. I have lived in many parts of the world. I know when to trust to my eyesight and when to question what my eyes seem to have seen."

He had now risen and was facing his brother.

"George," said General Flaxman, "Violet died on April the twelfth."

George Flaxman was about to speak once more; but the effort seemed to choke him. His voice refused to come. He threw himself into his chair and bowed his head with a hand on his forehead. Grace's sobs made the only sound in the room, though outside a joyous thrush sang his fitful evensong. The General laid a comforting hand upon his brother's shoulder.

"We must be resigned," he said. "It was the will of Heaven. We are Christian men."

"We have eyes to see," cried George Flaxman, starting up. "We have eyes to see; and I tell you that I saw with my eyes the face and figure of your daughter Violet at that window. I will not believe her to be dead."

The General had turned away and was standing looking into the garden. Grace had risen and come beside her uncle, taking one of his hands in both of hers, as she said in a low voic:

"Dear, dear Uncle George, we know how fond of her you were. We knew what a shock it would be to you."

"A shock—a shock? What is a shock?" he said, almost angrily, "I have received no shock. I will go to my room. There, perhaps I may see my way to realize what

you have told me—to reconcile what you have told me with what my eyes have seen."

The two brothers went upstairs together. Outside the room which George Flaxman was to occupy, he laid his hand on his brother's arm.

"Can you say nothing more—nothing that would tend to throw some light upon this strange thing?" said he, earnestly.

"I cannot blame you for being deceived, my dear George," replied the General. "For nearly an hour last night I myself was carried away as you have been."

"Carried away? What do you mean? Did you see what I have seen?"

"I was standing outside the Castle in the darkness last night, and for a second there appeared on the blind of one of the rooms behind which a light was shining, the shadow of a girl's head."

"The head of your daughter Violet?"

"So I fancied. I was completely overcome. I tell you an hour had passed before I had arrived at a rational solution of the mystery. Indeed the occurrence might have remained a mystery to me still had not the Rector in the course of the evening given me a hint—much more than a hint—of the truth."

"The truth?"

"Yes: cannot you see that a rational explanation of the matter is only forthcoming on the assumption that Paul Hampden has been unfaithful to the memory of his wife—that the man is a vulgar profligate, entirely devoid of feeling and of every sense of decency? I could not not, of course, tell you this in the presence of Grace. The poor child would not understand how a man could be so base."

"It is known then that Paul Hampden has had a stranger living in the Castle?"

"It may not be generally known: he has done his best to keep his intrigue a secret; but the Rector knows it, having been told by the butler, who himself only became aware of the truth by chance. After dinner, when we are alone, I will tell you all that I know and all that I have heard."

"Is it possible that I was deceived by what must be only a far-off resemblance? What a cur that man must be—a despicable cur! My poor Violet!"

"She is at rest."

The General shut the door of his brother's room and went to dress.

The dinner was a very mournful one. Grace's natural cheerfulness failed her upon this occasion. She perceived how deeply her uncle felt the news of Violet's death. In the drawing-room he had failed to appreciate the force of the sad truth, but now he had come to realize it, and he was not to be comforted. Violet had always been his favourite niece; but Grace had never, of course, felt jealous of her. The sisters had been accustomed to jest together on the subject of the favour shown to the elder by their Uncle George—it had, indeed, become one of those household jests which never lose their freshness, though referred to daily among the members of the one family. Grace felt deeply for the man who had loved Violet as a daughter, and who, she did not doubt, had been looking forward through all the months he had spent in the interior of Africa, to being by her side at home, but who had now come home only to learn that he must resign himself to her loss.

She left her father and uncle together in the dining-room as early as possible, and retired to the little room which she and her sister had called their boudoir in

those joyous months when they were together night and day previous to Violet's marriage. Here every object reminded Grace of her sister—the books that they had read together—the drawings that they had received from their school companions in Brussels—the dainty little silver ornaments that they had collected. Violet had taken nothing away from this room upon the occasion of her marriage. She had been accustomed to pay weekly visits to it and to sit with Grace exchanging views of life and of books, and of the various "movements" that convulsed society for a month or so in that world whose sounds but faintly reached them in their secluded village.

Grace remained seated on the little sofa with the portrait of her sister in its old chased Indian silver frame on the table before her. The last rays of the sun that was sinking among the trees of the park, came through the window and gave to the face of the picture the glow of life. Outside the swallows flitted athwart the slanting beams. When the summer would pass and call to them from another land they would depart; only to return, however, when the primroses were making millionaires of the spring meadows. But her sister who had been called away—what balm of flowers, what joy of love or fragrance of friendship would cause her to return?

The girl sat there while the last glow of the sunset drifted and dwindled round the west, and the soft summer twilight had come. She was thinking, not of the lover who was on his way to claim her for his wife, but of the dear sister who had shared that room with her.

In the dining-room the two brothers remained talking in the dusk. A servant entered the room and enquired if he would light the candles. The General replied that there was no need for him to do so, and the man withdrew.

The brothers were still seated at the dining room table an hour later, conversing in the darkness in low tones, when the door opened. Grace was standing in the flood of light that came from the hall lamp. She entered and closed the door, making the room in darkness once more. She took an uncertain step or two forward and then grasped, with both hands, the back of her father's chair. Her breath came quickly and spasmodically.

She stood there for some moments, and through the silence the sound of her breathing was clearly heard.

Her father put his hands over hers, saying, "Dearest child, you are excited. What has happened to disturb you?"

There was another long space of silence before the girl seemed to find words. Then she said, in low, earnest tones:

"She is there—there—I saw her—Violet."

Both men started up.

"For God's sake explain yourself, Grace," said her father huskily.

"She is there now," said the girl in a whisper. "You will find her there—in the room that we used to call our boudoir."

"My poor child!" said her father, putting his arms about her. "My poor child, calm yourself."

"I am calm," she said. "Why should I be otherwise? I was sitting there in the dusk thinking of her, and when I rose from the sofa she was sitting there. I

thought that it was a dream; but it was no dream, unless I am asleep at this moment."

"Perhaps she is," whispered George Flaxman.

"No, no; I am not asleep—I was not asleep. I saw her there, and I waited with my eyes fixed upon her for some minutes; but I was afraid to speak lest the delight of looking at my darling should pass away with the first word I might utter. Then I thought of you—you would wish to share the Supreme joy of seeing her again. Go to her—go to her—tell her—ah, my God, I am sinking—sinking!"

Her father had both his arms about her now. He carried her to a sofa and laid her down, while he called for a light and restoratives.

But Grace did not faint. For a minute she lay as if unconscious upon the sofa, her face deathly white. Then she opened her eyes and whispered:

"Why do you stay with me? Please go to her—go to her."

"My poor child!" said the General. "Go to her," she said again. "I will, my dear," said her uncle, and he walked out of the room.

She seemed pleased, and quickly drank the liqueur glass of brandy that her father held to her lips. The colour returned to her face. She made an attempt to sit up.

"I feel all right," she said. "Please do not mind me; go to her—she is there."

"I will stay with you," said her father. "Do not let your mind dwell upon anything that may have happened—anything that you may have seen. Great heavens! Grace, think that Arthur will be here in the course of a day or two. You would not like to be ill when he arrives."

"Why should I be ill?" she said. "I feel quite strong now. I only felt weak for a moment. Why will you not go to Violet? Indeed she is waiting. But Uncle George will see her. It seemed so natural to me—oh, I saw at once how natural it was that she should wish to see Uncle George: she was always his favourite."

Then George Flaxman returned to the room, and at the sound of the opening of the door she started up, crying, "You have seen her?"

"No, my dear child," he replied. "I was not so fortunate as you. There was no one in the room."

"Ah, I thought she would have stayed for you," said Grace.

In the course of a short time she was able to walk upstairs to her bedroom. Her father asked her would she not like her maid to sleep in the room with her, and she replied that she would prefer being alone. The General insisted, however, on the maid's sleeping in the dressing-room.

When the two men were once more alone together they looked at one another for some moments without speaking. It was George Flaxman who broke the silence.

"What are we to say to this?" he asked. "What remains to be said?" Cried the General quickly.

"You take it for granted that the child was set thinking in the darkness through my persistence in declaring that it was Violet whom I had seen at the window at the Castle?"

"Isn't that the most rational explanation of what occurred?"

"It is certainly the explanation that any rational man would offer to another to account for an incident that is not susceptible of a simpler explanation."

"The poor child had doubtless been set thinking of ghosts and suchlike fancies by dwelling on all that you said—we could not tell her on what grounds we had accounted for your mistake."

"Assuming that it was a mistake."

"Assuming? Oh, my dear George—"

"The whole thing is more of a mystery than anything I've yet known. The more I think over it the more mysterious it seems. You told me about the servants—two of them men—leaving the Castle. Did they take that step because of the profligacy of their master? Then the butler hears the voice of a woman, and is so disturbed in his mind, that he takes a bee line to the parson to purge his soul. Next you go secretly up to the Castle, and you see for an instant, on the transparent blind of one of the windows, the outline of a girl's head, which you say more than suggested a likeness to your daughter. Then I arrive here with my story, and, lastly, Grace enters this room to tell us—what she told us. Was there ever such a train of coincidences?"

"But where does it lead us to?" The General had asked his question almost before his brother had ceased to speak. "Accept the coincidences as other than the result of chance and where do we find ourselves?"

"In the hands of God," said George Flaxman.

Chapter X

THE next morning George Flaxman was surprised to see Grace cutting roses in the garden before breakfast. He hastened to her side and kissed her.

Illustration:
Grace Flaxman

"I need not ask you how you are today," he said. "You look as well as you did when you welcomed me at the gate yesterday."

"I feel quite well, indeed; why should I not?" said she.

"Come with me to the end of the garden, so that we may speak a few words together before your father comes down."

They strolled away from the rose beds to the little shrubbery.

"I should like to know," he continued, "what you think this morning about all that occurred last night. Are you still under the impression that your sister appeared in the room where you were sitting?"

"I wonder if I seem to you very foolish, when I say that I feel exactly the same on that point as I did when I entered the dining-room where you were sitting," said she.

"You do not seem in the least foolish, my child," said he. "Did I seem foolish when I persisted in asserting that the face which I had seen at that window in the old tower was the face of your sister?"

"But you don't still think so," she cried. "Do I not?" said he. "Perhaps I don't—I can scarcely tell you what I think."

"Why should you not tell me? I will not say, as papa does, that one cannot trust the evidence of one's eyes."

"But that's just what every reasonable person should say, my dear. Of all our senses, sight is the one that most frequently deceives us. What we see depends not upon what is before us at that instant, but upon the condition of our minds. You said that you were thinking about poor Violet as you sat alone in that room where you so frequently sat together?"

"Yes; I passed more than an hour with her portrait before me, and I recollect thinking how lovely was the effect of a ray of sunset light that streamed through the leaves of a chestnut upon her face; it gave it the appearance of life."

"And shortly afterwards—no, not until another hour had passed and the dusk had come, you saw her sitting near you?"

"That is so. Her eyes were fixed upon me; they were not mournful—they were smiling."

"As they smile in the portrait at which you had been looking?"

"Exactly; and that lends force to your view regarding the ease with which an impression of seeing an object can be acquired by one."

"Of course it would do so, if I wished to affirm that you were under a delusion. But I do nothing of the sort. I have seen strange things in the world from time to time. I have lived in India, and I have come upon much that was strange there. Latterly in Central Africa I have been among some of the most remarkable people that ever lived in the world. I am not so sceptical as I used to be on some matters. There are forces in nature of which we know as little at present as people did of the character of electricity a thousand years ago, or of the phonograph twenty years ago. Oh, yes, I have become very tolerant of delusions, my dear. When will your friend Arthur Hampden be here? Your father told me all about that earnest Egyptologist last evening."

The girl's face was buried in the bunch of roses that she had just cut—it was as rosy as the roses.

"Tomorrow, I hope," she replied. "We do not get our letters for another half hour. Ah, there is papa, down at last. I am sure you'll like him, uncle George."

"Your father? My love, I'm almost certain to acquire a liking for your father in time—yes, give me time."

She was pleased to hear him talk to her in his old way at last. She remembered how mournful their last meal together had been. A cloud had been hanging over them. But her uncle's temperament was a sanguine one, and she hoped that he would soon recover in a large measure from the effects of the great blow that he sustained. As for herself, she was a brave girl and she came to the conclusion that she must conceal all that she felt regarding the mysterious incident of the night. She knew that her father believed that she had been the victim of a delusion—perhaps her uncle was under the same impression also—and she had made up her mind that it would be well for her to refrain from saying anything in the presence of her father, which might lead him to believe that she persisted in her original assertion regarding the appearance of her sister. He could never be brought to think of the occurrence except as a delusion—of this she felt convinced, and so she thought it would be wise on her part to tacitly admit that his

explanation of what seemed a great mystery was the rational one—as indeed it was.

She saw that he looked at her with some degree of anxiety when she had kissed him saying, "Good morning," and she noted how he brightened up when he perceived that she was in her usual health and spirits.

Before the little party had risen from breakfast, the letter from Arthur which Grace was expecting, was put into her hand. It told her that he would arrive the next day, and that he would accept the hospitality which her father had offered to him by the letter which he had received at Venice.

"I am glad that he has not made up his mind to go to the Castle," said the General to his brother, when Grace had gone to read her letter once more in the open air. Some passages that it contained should, she felt, be read only among the scents of a rose garden in bloom. "Yes, and if he is the man I take him to be, he will hold himself aloof from that heartless brother of his. In any case I will give him to understand pretty plainly what we expect of him in regard to Paul. If he fancies that we do not resent the gross insult which he has put upon the family of his late wife, Paul Hampden must be convinced of his mistake."

"It might be wise to let Hampden find out for himself all that there is to be found out," said George Flaxman. "Do you think that we should meet him with denunciations of his brother before we know exactly how we stand?"

"How we stand?"

"Yes. We can scarcely call a man a heartless profligate merely because one of us has heard some servants' whisperings repeated by a parson."

"No, but have we not seen with our eyes—"

"My dear brother, we have seen nothing that could possibly be regarded as evidence of Paul Hampden's heartlessness. We have seen enough to make us feel that we are on the borders of a mystery."

"A mystery? I don't believe in your mysteries. Unfortunately there's nothing mysterious in the conduct of a heartless sensualist."

"Do you not think that any man who was anxious to act as you believe Paul Hampden to have acted, would have chosen a locale for his escapades where he is not so well known, and where, consequently, no scandal would attach to him, however vicious he might be? Why should Paul Hampden feel so deep an attachment to that rambling old Castle of his that he must needs make it the scene of so revolting an episode as that of which you accuse him? Why should he not have gone to London where he might carry out his evil designs and enjoy the undoubted pleasures of sin? He would have a fine free field there, and he would pass unnoticed among the thousands of other rich men who make the pursuit of pleasure the study of their lives. How long has he been living exclusively in that Norman tower?"

"Ever since Rodney Sefton was his guest." George Flaxman sprang from his chair. "Rodney Sefton! Rodney Sefton!" he cried. "Do you mean to say that Rodney Sefton was Paul Hampden's guest?"

"He was at the Castle for nearly a month. He arrived the morning after Violet's death."

George Flaxman stared at him for a few moments, and then dropped into his chair again. "Great heavens!" he said. "Great heavens! Rodney Sefton I wonder if he brought with him a dark-faced man—a Persian who called himself Albaran."

"He came with no one except Arthur Hampden," said the General. "What has occurred to astonish you? What light can Sefton throw on the matter which we were discussing?"

"What light? Have you not heard how he has given up his life to the unearthing of the records of the mysteries of ancient Egypt?"

"I heard, of course, that he was an enthusiast on the subject of Egyptian archaeology. But why are we wandering from the point on which we were talking? What has Rodney Sefton and his craze to do with Paul Hampden?"

"My dear brother, let me beg of you to say nothing for a day or two to Arthur Hampden regarding Paul's delinquencies. If he finds them out for himself he will know how to act, I am sure. He would be the first to condemn such heartlessness. Isn't that your opinion?"

"Undoubtedly it is. If I had not got so much confidence in him I would not give my consent to Grace's engagement to him. Still, I should like him to know—"

"He will know everything there is to be known before he is here for many days—perhaps, hours. We need not be at the trouble of letting him know what suspicions we may entertain—"

"With good reason."

"Certainly with good reason, regarding his brother's course of life. Meantime I would say nothing to Grace, if I were you, about that occurrence last night. She is the bravest girl I ever met, and you have every reason to be proud of her."

"She is a good girl, George. She has come to take the reasonable view of that matter. I knew, of course, that with the light of day she would come to see that she had been under a delusion. She is not a girl to believe in ghosts."

"No; she is your daughter, and the bravest girl that ever lived. I think that I would like to have a chat with the parson before lunch, and it is just within the bounds of possibility that I might, before dinner, come across at least one of those servants who ran away from the Castle."

"Good. It is as well to have our evidence cut and dried; though, mind you, I am convinced that what you say is true: Arthur Hampden will be the first to renounce his brother when he finds out—as he is certain to do without our assistance—all that there is to find out. If I were not convinced of this I would send him about his business, much though I like him, and though poor Grace is in love with him."

George Flaxman took down his hat from its peg, and, lighting a large cigar, strolled away.

He wore a strange look when he returned to lunch, half an hour past the appointed time.

Grace's hopes for the recovery of his spirits fell very low before lunch was over. He had scarcely a word to say to either his brother or his niece.

Yes, he had been to see the Rector, he said.

After a wretched meal he put on his hat once more and walked away, returning just in time to dress for dinner.

Yes, he had seen one of the servants who had discharged themselves from the Castle, he told the General when they were alone after dinner; but he said nothing

further at that time; he only made the suggestion that Grace should not be left to mope alone in the drawing-room or the boudoir where she had been for so long on the previous night.

His brother assented, and they went together to the drawing-room.

But it is doubtful if their company had any cheering influence upon Grace. They were both in low spirits—her uncle especially.

Chapter XI

ARTHUR HAMPDEN arrived the next afternoon. He had nothing to complain of in respect of his greeting by Grace. Her suspicion of shyness, with the delicate rose tint flying over her fair face, added to its charm.

"How good you are," he whispered; "and you are my love—my love."

"Papa is somewhere about—I wonder he is not here. He cannot have heard of your arrival," she said, going to the door.

"I will make him aware of it," he cried, with a laugh, and then he glanced out of the window, saying, without a laugh, "And Paul, have you seen anything of Paul lately?"

She made a little pause before answering—she meant her pause to convey a good deal to him (and it did). "A fortnight ago we called on him—yes, I think it was quite a fortnight ago yesterday."

"And he was well?"

"I suppose so." She was looking at the tips of her fingers.

"Oh."

"Poor fellow! He does not go out at all. At first, after you left, he was much better. He seemed to be bearing up after the terrible shock. But now—I hardly know how to describe him. He seems over-anxious about something. The servants will not live in the Castle. They talk—whisper."

"Whisper? What have they to whisper about?"

"I cannot tell. He has shut himself up in the tower and gives people to understand that he is working in the laboratory. I'm sure papa will talk to you about him. He suggested writing to you to return, but the next day I got your letter. At that time we pitied him. But I fancy that papa has changed within the past few days."

"Something must have happened—he must have heard some of those whisperings."

Arthur had turned away to the window, and his voice was husky.

"I'm sure that papa will tell you all that is to be told," said she. "I wonder where he can be. Uncle George is with us just now."

With a drawing-in of his breath that sounded like a sigh, Arthur said:

"That must be very pleasant for you all. Whispers? Whispers of what, I wonder?"

"You know how servants will whisper, even though they have no cause for it. You must talk to papa."

"I will. You and I, my beloved, shall have many hours together, I hope."

She gave a little laugh as he took her hand and held it to his lips.

Perhaps the General's greeting of him was a trifle constrained. It had just a suspicion of a full dress parade about it. But George Flaxman's shake of the hand had genuine cordiality in it. He named an officer of the scientific corps who had assisted at the fight at Bab-el-Wady and had witnessed Arthur's feat of arms that had won for him the Cross; and Arthur, pooh-poohing the feat of arms, spoke warmly of the man whose name had been mentioned, declaring that he was surely the jolliest Irishman of the whole race, which was saying a good deal.

Then there was a reference to one especial song of his—what was the name of it? The ex-Colonel remembered it. He had sung it on the Nile, the Afghan passes had echoed it back, and King Thebaw's palace had shaken in the applause that followed a rendering of it in that building.

It was clear that the ex-Colonel and the ex-Major would become fast friends before many hours would have passed.

The dinner of this night had some element of cheerfulness, though it was plain to Grace that Arthur was not quite at his ease. His nervous manner at times suggested the manner of his brother upon the last occasion that Grace and her father had been at the Castle. Now and again he had an air of distraction that caused the girl to feel that she had been incautious in what she had said to him regarding his brother. It seemed to her that he was anxious on behalf of Paul.

She left the table at the earliest moment, feeling sure that her father would speak to Arthur about the Castle menage, and she thought that the sooner the matter was discussed the more satisfactory it would be for the household.

It was Arthur who made the first reference to his brother, when the three men were alone. "Grace tells me that Paul has been be having rather strangely," said he. "The people in the neighbourhood have been talking about it, I dare say."

The General pulled himself together. He liked Arthur for the unhesitating way in which he had introduced a subject that suggested some unpleasantness.

"It is only to be expected that people should talk," said the General. "Paul seems to have thrown to the winds every sense of duty during the past few months. He shuts himself up in the Norman tower and denies himself to all callers with the exception of Grace and myself, and so far as we are concerned, I think it is very unlikely that we shall ever trouble him with another visit."

"Is it possible that you have come to that determination?" said Arthur. "I'm sure that you must have the gravest reason for arriving at such a decision."

"I think I have," said the General. "But I shouldn't like to condemn the man unheard. His desire for isolation immediately after the death of poor Violet is quite intelligible: his temperament may not be one of those that find relief in travel. But there are some other points in connection with this isolation of his that have put a very different and a much less creditable aspect upon it."

"You surprise me, sir," said Arthur. "I fancied that I would," said the General. There was a considerable pause before he leant across the table saying, "If I were to accuse your brother with being a heartless profligate—"

"I should leave your house without the delay of a moment, General Flaxman," said Arthur, steadfastly. "I hope you will not think it necessary to refer to him in such terms. I can answer for my brother with every confidence. So far from being heartless, he has always been kind-hearted and sympathetic. As for profligacy,

such a charge would sound nothing short of ridiculous to anyone who has known his past life."

"Whatever his past record may have been," cried the General, "I have extremely good reasons for believing that his seclusion has been shared for some time—heaven knows how long—by a stranger—a woman."

Arthur sprang to his feet.

"Don't say a word," cried Colonel Flaxman, speaking for the first time since Grace had left the table. "Don't speak a word, Hampden; give me leave to say that whoever believes what my brother has said, believes a lie. There is no—no—strange woman at the Castle—there never has been one."

The General stared at his brother.

"What can you possibly mean?" he asked, in a slow, measured voice.

"I passed an hour with the Rector yesterday and another with one of the servants who left the Castle; I have given you the result of both those interviews."

For some moments the General remained speechless. He looked first at his brother, then at Arthur.

"Do you mean to tell me that both you and I have been deceived by our own eyes?" he cried at last, pointing a finger at his brother.

"That is the conclusion I have come to."

"Then whom, in the name of heaven, did we see at that window of the tower?"

"Perhaps Hampden can answer that question, or, if not, Hampden's friend, Rodney Sefton."

General Flaxman was looking more astonished than ever.

"What folly is this?" he cried. "What can Hampden or Sefton have to say to this business?"

"Nothing—perhaps. Here is Hampden at any rate, ask him."

"I do not need to be asked anything," said Arthur. "I am quite in ignorance of what or whom you saw at the window. But I am prepared to give any assurance that may be asked of me respecting my brother's honour. He is quite incapable of acting the heartless—the atrocious part which you suggest might be attributed to him, General. I hope that assurance will satisfy you, sir."

"I am bewildered—bewildered," said the General. "I am beginning to feel that I am only fit for Bedlam. Two days ago we agreed that many things connected with the Castle were mysterious, but now the mysterious elements are increased tenfold."

"It is the darkness before the dawn," said his brother. "I have a notion that if Hampden only sets about the business of clearing up the mystery he will succeed. Now, I think we would do well to go to Grace. She may be lonely."

Arthur rose with alacrity. The General was not quite so expeditious. He motioned his brother, who was about to open the door, to allow it to remain closed. Then he turned to Arthur, saying:

"I hope that you will understand, Arthur, that anything I said just now, I said in the best faith. I had always the greatest regard for Paul, and you can understand that I would not say anything that reflected upon him, without the greatest pain."

"You have nothing to withdraw, sir," said Arthur. "As Colonel Flaxman says, we may be on the eve of an extraordinary revelation. God only knows what will be the result of making it."

The General gave a shrug.

"More mystery," said he. "What has come over us in this quiet part of the world? During the past week we have had as much mystery as would supply the most exacting society with topics for the year. For my own part I sincerely trust that we are coming to the end of our mysterious cycle. Yes, we had better go to Grace—there's no mystery about her—that's rather a blessing."

"No mystery?" said his brother. "Good Lord! no mystery about Grace? That is another way of saying that she is not a woman."

Chapter XII

"I WONDER, Hampden," said Colonel Flaxman, "if you ever came across any of the Priests of Hevoth in the course of your Egyptian investigations."

Arthur Hampden got such a shock as prevented his continuing his stroll to the end of the garden walk, to which he had been invited after breakfast the next day, by George Flaxman.

"Yes," he replied, resuming his stroll. "Yes, we came across some of the Priests of Hevoth. But both Sefton and I were under the impression that we alone knew of their existence."

"That is just where you made a mistake," said the Colonel. "I heard a great deal about them in Abyssinia a few years ago. But I heard much more six months ago when I came upon a strange people in Equatorial Africa. Among them there was one man who, I have every reason to believe, spoke the truth when he affirmed that he was a Priest of Hevoth. We became very intimate. He had just arrived from the Soudan, and he told me of the very promising investigations that were being made within the buried temple of Hevoth by two Englishmen—one of them was called Sefton, the other, I regret to say, my informant did not think much of as an investigator, and he had for gotten his name."

"I could not expect him to think much of me alongside Rodney Sefton," said Arthur. "Of course not—Sefton has spent his life over those investigations. I wonder what he has learned? Does he know as much as Albaran?"

"I'm afraid he does not. Have you seen Albaran?"

"Oh, yes; he was in Abyssinia when I was there. I found out that he was not a believer in the practicability of adapting ancient magic to Nineteenth Century life. Are you?"

"I cannot say at this moment."

"Possibly you will be able to say after you pay a visit to your brother."

"That is my hope."

"But you have fears? I only heard the day before yesterday that Sefton was a guest at the Castle from the day after Violet died."

"We were both there."

"Sefton shrinks from returning. Why?"

There was along pause before Arthur answered: "He has made further discoveries. The elements of the Life and the elements of the Soul he was led to

believe to be one and the same. To control the Life he fancied meant to control the Soul. He has found out his error."

"Great heaven! and he has hitherto only discovered the control of the Life?"

"No more. Now you can understand what are my fears when I turn in the direction of the Castle today."

"I can understand. I think Sefton did wisely in insisting on secrecy. But it cannot remain a secret, Hampden. You yourself must perceive that after today secrecy is impossible. Whether you have failed or succeeded, an explanation must be forthcoming."

"My God!" cried Arthur, after a pause. "It is an awful thing interfering with an inexorable law of Nature."

"But who can tell what laws of Nature are inexorable?" said Colonel Flaxman. "Here comes Grace to ask what it is that we have been talking about. Will she ever know, I wonder."

"God only can tell," said Arthur. "If we have failed, how could I frame words to tell her of our failure?"

The day that had been bright, but very close, became overcast at noon, and increased in darkness and sultriness toward evening. No breeze arose to stir the heavy-hanging foliage—the slumberous breadths of woodland. To be under the sky gave one the oppressive feeling of being under the heavy foliage of an elm, and to look from the little slope of the garden down at the foliage of the silent elms gave one the feeling of looking into the billowy masses of a black, unbroken sea. There was no sound of birds in the air, only the hum of a bee. The cattle stood with bent heads in the meadows.

"Thunder before nightfall," said the Colonel. "I can smell the sulphur."

"And I can feel it," said Grace, putting her hand to her forehead. "I am unfortunate in being able to predict with absolute certainty the coming of a storm. If the storm is in proportion to the severity of my head ache it will be tropical."

This was at lunch-time. She had spent the morning with Arthur in the garden. He had told her that he meant to devote the first day of his return to her. He would not go to the Castle until the next morning. Before the hour for tea, she had given in: her head-ache made it impossible for her to sit up. She went to her room hoping to be able to be present at dinner; but her hope was not realised. The exchange of reminiscences among the three men did not make the dinner less dreary. Each of them seemed abstracted. The weight of the sultry evening seemed pressing upon them. It was actually a relief to them when, just as they were lighting their cigars, the butler entered to tell the General that the Rector was in the study, anxious to see him for a short time. The General rose hastily; but begged his brother and Arthur to remain where they were. He did not know what the Rector could possibly want with him, he said, but whatever the business was, it could not keep him long. Perhaps the Rector would be induced to join them.

The moment that he left the room, Colonel Flaxman looked across the table to Arthur saying:

"If you'll take my advice you'll stroll up to the Castle at once. Mr. Hazell is full of the talk of the servants—the mysterious voices—the strange things they have witnessed. Some of them ran away. If you are found here when the interview in the

study is over, you'll be forced to listen to a good deal that will cause you to be placed in a rather awkward position."

"I'm being suffocated here," said Arthur huskily. "My God! What I am suffering!—the suspense—the suspense—and yet I am too great a coward to go straight up to the Castle and learn all that there is to be known. I should have gone this morning—last night: I was glad of the excuse to put it off for another day."

"You talk of your suspense," said the Colonel in a low voice. "Man, what is your suspense to mine—to theirs—the suspense of my brother and his child?"

"They know nothing."

"They know nothing now, but only because the Rector had not the courage to tell all that had been confessed to him. Arthur Hampden, he is telling now all that he left untold when he was last here. If you do not go up to the Castle at once, I will go there myself and learn all that there is to be known. I will learn whose was the face that looked out to me from the window on the evening that I arrived here." Arthur clutched his arm.

"You saw her—*her?*" he whispered.

"I saw it—*it*," said the Colonel, in a still lower voice. His forehead was damp and his hand was trembling on the side of the table.

"It?"

"And it came here on the same evening—yes, to Grace's room—she saw it."

"Is it possible? She did not tell me."

"Why should she? She is the bravest girl alive. She allows her father to believe that she was the victim of a delusion."

"I will go."

Arthur had risen. He put out his hand to George Flaxman, who grasped it heartily. Arthur saw that his eyes were full of tears. Waiting only to take the key of the side door in the park wall—it was hanging in the hall—he left the house. He did not even put a dust coat over his dinner dress.

A lurid copper streak in the West marked the setting of the sun on this prematurely dark evening. The rumble of distant thunder came from another quarter of the sky, but Arthur knew that the storm would not break for some time.

When he had reached the Church, the one suggestion of light in the sky had dwindled away to a copper wire. He walked among the white slabs of the churchyard. The silence of everything was oppressive. It was that waiting silence which precedes a thunderstorm. He stood among the dead; and the fancy came to him that the silence which was now over the world was the awful stillness that would be broken by the Archangel's trumpet, rending the graves asunder.

He stood there picturing the scene of the Last Resurrection. All at once he recollected the visit that he had made alone to the Court of Life in the buried Temple. He thought of the great wonder that had taken possession of him when he had seen the dead bodies arise from the pavement.

The dull rumble of the distant thunder seemed to him to come from the vault where his father and mother lay in their coffins. He thought of the last time that that vault had been opened. He almost fled from the place, and up the sloping ground to the demesne wall. He unlocked the little side door, and passed through into the blackness of the trees beyond.

There was no quarter of the park that was not familiar to him. He had wandered about it with his brother when they were boys, and they had become acquainted with almost every tree. But now he stood among these trees as if he were a poacher, fearful of the approach of someone who would apprehend him. He walked stealthily from tree to tree breathing hard, as though the exertion were too much for him.

"I am a coward—a coward," he muttered. "Why should I shrink from what has been done? Was it a crime? It is a crime to take life, not to restore it. The life—the life—but what is the Life without the Soul? I have seen the others—the living soulless ones! Oh, my God, grant that I may never see another!"

A sudden current of wind swept among the foliage above him. For the instant that it was in passing he felt it like the touch of a hand cold in death upon his face. He shuddered. The leaves above him were silent again, but he could hear the breeze, fingering, so to speak, the heavy foliage from tree to tree in the distance.

Then not even the familiar night cries of the creatures of the wood stirred the stillness into sound.

As he went on, the great death's-head moths fluttered into his face.

Chapter XIII

ALTHOUGH he could have gone blindfolded to the Castle from the most distant part of the Park, he now seemed to have missed his way. He had, without thinking in what direction he was going, taken the track that led to the lake into which the little stream trickled. He started as if awaking from a dream, when he found himself beside the black water. Then from the margin there arose a mighty heron and stretched away over head, its great wings winnowing the air. A flash of lightning far away showed him for an instant the flying bird above the lines of trees.

It suggested to him a disembodied soul seeking rest but finding none, either in the heaven above or the earth beneath.

Then.....

From the opposite side of the little lake there came before his eyes something that made him fall upon his knees with a cry—a flash of lightning revealed it. He cried out and covered his eyes with his hands.

"Do not come near me," he said, as if speaking in the ears of some human being beside him. "Do not come near me; I know all that there is to be known now."

It was beside him—he could feel that it was beside him. He had experienced that sensation during the previous two months in the deserts of the Nile—the sensation of being led by something that was impalpable—something that had unlimited power over him—something that the mind of man had never before conceived of.

He was powerless by the side of that silent Thing. It raised him to his feet and forced him along. He knew not in what direction he was going. He was master of none of his movements. He seemed to be watching himself hurrying along with bent head, as he had sometimes felt in a dream that he was a silent spectator of

some action of his own. It was with a start—a sense of an oppression being suddenly removed—that he found himself standing on the Castle terrace, staring up at the lighted windows of the tower. The lightning played above it making intermittently a lurid background against which every stone of the ancient battlement stood out clearly for several seconds.

When he had pulled the hall bell, a long time elapsed before the door was opened. The old butler, Vicary, stood before him, the hall lamp showing how scared was his look as he peered out into the darkness of the night.

"You know me, Vicary, I think," said Arthur, going into the great entrance hall.

The old man's hands dropped limply by his sides.

"If this is some more of the tricks of the devil that has got a hold of this house, I tell ye in the name of the God I worship to depart and leave us in peace," said he in a feeble voice.

"Come, Vicary, you surely know me," said Arthur. "I am here to see my brother. He is in the tower rooms, I know. I will go to him."

"If it is you, indeed, sir, I'm glad to see you; but if it's you that have power to change yourself into an angel of light, I bid ye go hence, in the name of God and with the sign of Christ's Cross."

The old man had snatched from the wall where it was hanging, the huge two-handed sword of a Crusader, and was holding the hilt aloft between himself and Arthur.

Illustration:
The huge two-handed sword of a Crusader

Arthur paused for a moment, and actually laughed at the figure who was now wielding the ancient weapon. Then leaving him still holding the sword aloft, he crossed the hall and went up the half dozen stone steps to the small barbed door leading to the tower. The door was not locked, and he swung it out to the wall and went up the steep staircase.

The sound of the thunder reverberated among the narrow walls. It was followed by the sound of laughter from above—such laughter as Arthur had only once before heard.

The second door was some thirty steps higher, shutting off access to the remainder of the stairway. When Arthur reached it in the darkness he found that it had been made fast. He struck at it with all his might for some time, and the sound was echoed from above and below.

After a space he heard the heavy beams that barred the door from above being with drawn. The door swung slowly open, and he saw by the light of the lamp in a niche in the wall, that the man who stood in the doorway was his brother Paul.

"I have come," he said.

"You have come?" cried Paul. "Yes, I see that you have come. But where is Rodney Sefton? Why is he not here with you to witness my happiness? Where is that man who believed that by the tricks of the devil he could accomplish what God has not yet done on earth?"

His eyes were gleaming in the light of madness. His face was pale and emaciated, and the laugh which he gave when he had spoken was the laugh of a

maniac. It was less hideous, however, than the soulless laughter which had rung down the staircase after the roll of the thunder.

"He is not here," said Arthur, huskily. "He could do nothing if he were here. Sefton is as powerless as I am. We have found out the truth—he has found out what are the limits of the power that he acquired only the day before he came here with me."

"He left me to find out what were those limits," cried Paul Hampden. "Come with me. I need your advice."

He laid his hand upon Arthur's arm and led him up to where two doors gave upon a small lobby. He threw open one of the doors, and before entering Arthur saw that the room was brilliantly lighted, and that the furniture was the old oak that had been in it as long as he could remember.

"Enter," cried Paul, with another laugh. "Enter, and see what has been given to me as the blessing of God, by your friend!" Arthur followed him, but before he had taken more than a single step beyond the threshold, a cry of horror broke from him, and he fell up against the wall.

"Give me your advice," shouted Paul. "Tell me which of them is my wife—that soulless thing of flesh and blood which I abhor, or that other who is as impalpable as air, whom I love. Which is my wife?—which is my wife?"

Arthur Hampden turned, and fled—down the stairs—out through the entrance door—into the storm that had now broken in all its fury, the lightning quivering through the air, showing every leaf of the thick foliage, the thunder pealing and crackling and stammering through the park.

How did he reach the churchyard? He could not understand how he came to be sheltering from the torrent of rain that was sweeping over the church roof, and running in a cataract down the gravel paths.

He was standing in the comparative shelter of one of the flying buttresses, though he had no recollection of going there. He did not even know whether he was wet or dry until he had passed his hand over the sleeves of his coat. They were wet, though not drenched, so he knew that he must have instinctively run for shelter, the moment the rain had swept down upon him.

He remained in shelter, looking down the long vistas of brilliancy cut through the darkness by the livid lightning. Every incident of the landscape for miles around was brought before his eyes.

The rain ceased with the abruptness of one of the flashes of lightning. One instant it was roaring, the next it was silent. Only the rushing of the water down the steep paths continued.

He might have left his place of shelter, but he did not do so. How could he return to the house of General Flaxman? It was he who had brought Rodney Sefton to the Castle at first, and he felt that he was accountable for that horror which had come to pass. It was the truth that his brother had spoken: that horror was the trick of the devil.

And they had looked on it as the gift of God Himself to them alone!

With this thought all the dogged courage that was part of his nature returned to him. He had once found himself surrounded by Afghans of the hills. He wheeled his horse, and told his orderly to follow his example and try to escape. An instant afterwards he perceived that their way was cut off. He turned and faced the

enemy. With his trooper by his side he charged them twice, sabring to right and left. Then he and the soldier cut their way through the knives that were glittering across the hill track and got back to their tent.

He felt now as he had felt at that time. He would nerve himself to fight the devil and all his tricks. Whatever might come of it, he would return to the Castle. He would not leave his brother to fight the devil alone. He felt that at last he had come into the possession of his senses. He instinctively turned up the collar of his coat and buttoned it across his chest, as though he were preparing himself for a physical charge against an enemy. He rushed out from his place of shelter; but he had scarcely reached the path among the white slabs, when a jagged lightning flash blazed crimson before him. The text on a white stone slab beside him shone in letters of blood for an instant before his eyes:

IN THE HANDS OF GOD

were the words that he read in that instant. The next moment his arm was clutched at fiercely from behind.

He shook himself loose and turned with set teeth and clenched hands.

Illustration:
He shook himself loose and turned

"For the love of God!" panted a man's voice.

"Who are you, in the name of God?" said Arthur.

Another flash showed him a bare-headed man wearing only a shirt and trousers. He was still breathing hard.

"For the love of God, sir, whoever you are, run to the village and arouse them. The Castle has been fired by the lightning—see there—the blaze—I've broken my ankle and can go no farther."

Arthur could see above the tops of the trees a light as of flames, and the black cloud above was tinged with crimson.

In another moment he had reached the little door in the park-wall—he had left it open—and was rushing madly among the trees in the direction of the Castle. There was no likelihood of his losing his way this time. Another rush along the great avenue and there came a blaze before his eyes—a blaze and a mighty thundercloud of smoke that rolled in mighty volumes to meet the thundercloud overhead.

The effect of the illumination of the cloud of smoke by the yellow fire below and the crimson lightning from behind was like nothing that had ever been seen before. The whole building was not in flames, only the ancient tower. So much Arthur perceived in a moment. All the time he was crossing the soaking grass of the park, he was asking himself if it was possible that the lightning which had set the tower on fire, had dealt death as well as destruction.

If his brother had not been struck by the lightning, he would surely have had time to escape from the fire. The rooms were a mass of woodwork. They were panelled with old oak as dry as tinder, but the stairs were of stone and a descent would be possible by them long after the first outbreak of the fire.

He came upon a man hurrying down the avenue. He stopped him, with the cry:

"Safe?—is everyone safe?"

"The master and the old nurse are in the tower," was the reply, shouted back by the man as he hurried on.

Arthur rushed among the servants who were trying to find out how the Castle fire engine worked. They had wheeled it to the side of the ornamental fish-pond.

"Your master?" he cried, with whatever breath still remained with him.

"There's hope yet; the men are fetching a ladder," was the reply a servant made to him. He ran into the entrance hall, and on to the door leading to the tower staircase. The door was off its hinges and the whole space where it had been was blocked with heaps of masonry, above which the flames were playing as in a furnace.

He staggered back. He saw that the lightning must have fractured at least the supports of some of the stone stairs, and the whole had fallen in a heap, blocking up all the way from below.

He had only been a few moments at the bottom of the broken stairs when a cry arose outside. He ran out and found that a ladder had just been brought. It was a long one, but he perceived in a moment that, although it would reach to the roof of one wing of the Castle, it would not go more than half way up the tower; and already the flames were leaping fitfully out of all the lower windows like the fiery tongues of dragons from their cavernous jaws.

The men were leaning the ladder against the tower when he appeared.

"It's no use there," he cried. "Don't waste time. Put it against the roof of the side wing."

This was done. He ran up the ladder to the roof and stood on the ledge while a couple of the game-keepers followed him. Then they hauled up the ladder to the roof and set it against the tower.

It was not within ten feet of the embattlement.

"A rope!" shouted Arthur.

In a minute or two a moderately stout line was thrown up to him. He made it into coils, with a slip noose at one end. He went up the ladder, the men holding it on the roof where it had been set. Then, after many unsuccessful attempts, he managed to throw the noose of the rope over one of the stones of the parapet. He began to work his way hand over hand up the naked wall, and had already got within a few feet of the roof, when a shout arose from the men below. He looked up and saw two faces looking down on him: the face of Paul Hampden and the face of—*Another*. Paul had his arm about her. Their faces were close together.

"The rope—the rope," he shouted. "For God's sake come to the rope."

They did not seem to hear him. He dragged himself up through the flame and smoke that surged out from the lower windows—one hand was already on the parapet when there came the horrible sound of the crackling of wooden beams—a wild roar and a confused crash. His head was on a level with the masonry, and he saw that the roof of the tower had given way. He was looking into the mouth of a seething cauldron. Then the piece of masonry on which he was hanging gave way. He threw himself back and fell headlong down. His left arm jammed itself in between the topmost rung of the ladder and the wall, and broke; but he managed to hang there until one of the men on the roof below released him and helped him

down. He had a vague idea that Colonel Flaxman was bending over him, putting a rough splint on his arm, but after that he lost consciousness.

* * * * *

It was when Arthur Hampden was walking with his wife through a street in Bombay, during the honeymoon tour which they took through India, that a man with the clear-cut profile of a Persian and the dignity of an Arab, touched him on the arm and smiled.

"I believe that I was right," he said, in excellent English. "I believe that even Doctor Rodney Sefton thinks today that I was right in saying that when Death knocks at the door he should be admitted as an honoured guest. There are worse friends than Death, Major Hampden."

"You are right, Albaran," said Arthur. "But Rodney Sefton is still working at the books. He still hopes to discover the Secret of the Court of Life."

"The Secret of the Court—that means God," said Albaran. "I seek that secret among my fellowmen. Farewell."

"Who is that man?" said Grace. "He seems an ideal prophet."

"He is a prophet," said Arthur.