

Wolverden Tower

by Grant Allen, 1848-1899

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I

Maisie Llewelyn had never been asked to Wolverden before; therefore, she was not a little elated at Mrs. West's invitation. For Wolverden Hall, one of the loveliest Elizabethan manor-houses in the Weald of Kent, had been bought and fitted up in appropriate style (the phrase is the upholsterer's) by Colonel West, the famous millionaire from South Australia. The Colonel had lavished upon it untold wealth, fleeced from the backs of ten thousand sheep and an equal number of his fellow-countrymen; and Wolverden was now, if not the most beautiful, at least the most opulent country-house within easy reach of London.

Mrs. West was waiting at the station to meet Maisie. The house was full of Christmas guests already, it is true; but Mrs. West was a model of stately, old-

fashioned courtesy: she would not have omitted meeting one among the number on any less excuse than a royal command to appear at Windsor. She kissed Maisie on both cheeks—she had always been fond of Maisie—and, leaving two haughty young aristocrats (in powdered hair and blue-and-gold livery) to hunt up her luggage by the light of nature, sailed forth with her through the door to the obsequious carriage.

The drive up the avenue to Wolverden Hall Maisie found quite delicious. Even in their leafless winter condition the great limes looked so noble; and the ivy-covered hall at the end, with its mullioned windows, its Inigo Jones porch, and its creeper-clad gables, was as picturesque a building as the ideals one sees in Mr. Abbey's sketches. If only Arthur Hume had been one of the party now, Maisie's joy would have been complete. But what was the use of thinking so much about Arthur Hume, when she didn't even know whether Arthur Hume cared for her—

A tall, slim girl, Maisie Llewelyn, with rich black hair, and ethereal features, as became a descendant of Llewelyn ap Iorwerth. The sort of girl we none of us would have called anything more than "interesting" till Rossetti and Burne-Jones found eyes for us to see that the type is beautiful with a deeper beauty than that of your obvious pink-and-white prettiness. Her eyes, in particular, had a lustrous depth that was almost superhuman, and her fingers and nails were strangely transparent in their waxen softness.

"You won't mind my having put you in a ground-floor room in the new wing, my dear, will you?" Mrs West inquired, as she led Maisie personally to the quarters chosen for her. "You see, we 're so unusually full, because of these tableaux!"

Maisie gazed round the ground-floor room in the new wing with eyes of mute wonder. If this was the kind of lodging for which Mrs. West thought it necessary to apologise, Maisie wondered of what sort were those better rooms which she gave to the guests she delighted to honour. It was a large and exquisitely decorated chamber, with the softest and deepest Oriental carpet Maisie's feet had ever felt, and the daintiest curtains her eyes had ever lighted upon. True, it opened by French windows on to what was nominally the ground in front; but as the Italian terrace, with its formal balustrade and its great stone balls, was raised several feet above the level of the sloping garden below, the room was really on the first floor for all practical purposes. Indeed, Maisie rather liked the unwonted sense of space and freedom which was given by this easy access to the world without; and, as the windows were secured by great shutters and fasteners, she had no counterbalancing fear lest a nightly burglar should attempt to carry off her little pearl necklet or her amethyst brooch, instead of directing his whole attention to Mrs. West's famous diamond tiara.

She moved naturally to the window. She was fond of nature. The view it disclosed over the Weald at her feet was wide and varied. Misty range lay behind misty range, in a faint December haze, receding and receding, till away to the south, half hidden by vapour, the Sussex downs loomed vague in the distance. The village church, as happens so often in the case of old lordly manors, stood within the grounds of the Hall, and close by the house. It had been built, her hostess said, in the days of the Edwards, but had portions of an older Saxon edifice still enclosed in the chancel. The one eyesore in the view was its new white

tower, recently restored (or rather, rebuilt), which contrasted most painfully with the mellow grey stone and mouldering corbels of the nave and transept.

"What a pity it's been so spoiled!" Maisie exclaimed, looking across at the tower. Coming straight as she did from a Merioneth rectory, she took an ancestral interest in all that concerned churches.

"Oh, my dear!" Mrs. West cried, "please don't say that, I beg of you, to the Colonel. If you were to murmur 'spoiled' to him you'd wreck his digestion. He's spent ever so much money over securing the foundations and reproducing the sculpture on the old tower we took down, and it breaks his dear heart when anybody disapproves of it. For some people, you know, are so absurdly opposed to reasonable restoration."

"Oh, but this isn't even restoration, you know," Maisie said, with the frankness of twenty, and the specialist interest of an antiquary's daughter. "This is pure reconstruction."

"Perhaps so," Mrs. West answered. "But if you think so, my dear, don't breathe it at Wolverden."

A fire, of ostentatiously wealthy dimensions, and of the best glowing coal burned bright on the hearth, but the day was mild, and hardly more than autumnal. Maisie found the room quite unpleasantly hot. She opened the windows and stepped out on the terrace. Mrs. West followed her. They paced up and down the broad gravelled platform for a while—Maisie had not yet taken off her travelling-cloak and hat—and then strolled half unconsciously towards the gate of the church. The churchyard, to hide the tombstones of which the parapet had been erected, was full of quaint old monuments, with broken-nosed cherubs, some of them dating from a comparatively early period. The porch, with its sculptured niches deprived of their saints by puritan hands, was still rich and beautiful in its carved detail. On the seat inside an old woman was sitting. She did not rise as the lady of the manor approached, but went on mumbling and muttering inarticulately to herself in a sulky undertone. Still, Maisie was aware, none the less, that the moment she came near a strange light gleamed suddenly in the old woman's eyes, and that her glance was fixed upon her. A faint thrill of recognition seemed to pass like a flash through her palsied body. Maisie knew not why, but she was dimly afraid of the old woman's gaze upon her.

"It's a lovely old church!" Maisie said, looking up at the trefoil finials on the porch—"all, except the tower."

"We had to reconstruct it," Mrs. West answered apologetically. Mrs. West's general attitude in life was apologetic, as though she felt she had no right to so much more money than her fellow-creatures. "It would have fallen if we hadn't done something to buttress it up. It was really in a most dangerous and critical condition."

"Lies! lies! lies!" the old woman burst out suddenly, though in a strange, low tone, as if speaking to herself. "It would not have fallen—they knew it would not. It could not have fallen. It would never have fallen if they had not destroyed it. And even then—I was there when they pulled it down—each stone clung to each, with arms and legs and hands and claws, till they burst them asunder by main force with their new-fangled stuff—I don't know what they call it—dynamite, or something. It was all of it done for one man's vainglory!"

"Come away, dear," Mrs. West whispered. But Maisie loitered.

"Wolverden Tower was fasted thrice," the old woman continued, in a sing-song quaver. "It was fasted thrice with souls of maids against every assault of man or devil. It was fasted at the foundation against earthquake and ruin. It was fasted at the top against thunder and lightning. It was fasted in the middle against storm and battle. And there it would have stood for a thousand years if a wicked man had not raised a vainglorious hand against it. For that's what the rhyme says—

"Fasted thrice with souls of men.
Stands the tower of Wolverden;
Fasted thrice with maidens' blood.
A thousand years of fire and flood
Shall see it stand as erst it stood."

She paused a moment, then, raising one skinny hand towards the brand-new stone, she went on in the same voice, but with malignant fervour—

"A thousand years the tower shall stand
Till ill assailed by evil hand;
By evil hand in evil hour.
Fasted thrice with warlock's power.
Shall fall the stanes of Wulfhere's tower."

She tottered off as she ended, and took her seat on the edge of a depressed vault in the churchyard close by, still eyeing Maisie Llewellyn with a weird and curious glance, almost like the look which a famishing man casts upon the food in a shop-window.

"Who is she?" Maisie asked, shrinking away in undefined terror.

"Oh, old Bessie," Mrs. West answered, looking more apologetic (for the parish) than ever. "She's always hanging about here. She has nothing else to do, and she's an outdoor pauper. You see, that's the worst of having the church in one's grounds, which is otherwise picturesque and romantic and baronial; the road to it's public; you must admit all the world; and old Bessie will come here. The servants are afraid of her. They say she's a witch. She has the evil eye, and she drives girls to suicide. But they cross her hand with silver all the same, and she tells them their fortunes—gives them each a butler. She's full of dreadful stories about Wolverden Church—stories to make your blood run cold, my dear, compact with old superstitions and murders, and so forth. And they're true, too, that's the worst of them. She's quite a character. Mr. Blaydes, the antiquary, is really attached to her; he says she's now the sole living repository of the traditional folklore and history of the parish. But I don't care for it myself. It 'gars one greet,' as we say in Scotland. Too much burying alive in it, don't you know, my dear, to quite suit my fancy."

They turned back as she spoke towards the carved wooden lych-gate, one of the oldest and most exquisite of its class in England. When they reached the vault by whose doors old Bessie was seated, Maisie turned once more to gaze at the pointed

lancet windows of the Early English choir, and the still more ancient dog-tooth ornament of the ruined Norman Lady Chapel.

"How solidly it's built!" she exclaimed, looking up at the arches which alone survived the fury of the Puritan. "It really looks as if it would last for ever."

Old Bessie had bent her head, and seemed to be whispering something at the door of the vault. But at the sound she raised her eyes, and, turning her wizened face towards the lady of the manor, mumbled through her few remaining fang-like teeth an old local saying, "*Bradbury for length, Wolverden for strength, and Church Hatton for beauty!*"

"Three brothers builded churches three;
And fasted thrice each church shall be:
Fasted thrice with maidens' blood.
To make them safe from fire and flood;
Fasted thrice with souls of men.
Hatton, Bradbury, Wolverden!"

"Come away," Maisie said, shuddering. "I'm afraid of that woman. Why was she whispering at the doors of the vault down there? I don't like the look of her."

"My dear," Mrs. West answered, in no less terrified a tone, "I will confess I don't like the look of her myself. I wish she'd leave the place. I've tried to make her. The Colonel offered her fifty pounds down and a nice cottage in Surrey if only she'd go—she frightens me so much; but she wouldn't hear of it. She said she must stop by the bodies of her dead—that's her style, don't you see: a sort of modern ghoul, a degenerate vampire—and from the bodies of her dead in Wolverden Church no living soul should ever move her."

II

For dinner Maisie wore her white satin Empire dress, high-waisted, low-necked, and cut in the bodice with a certain baby-like simplicity of style which exactly suited her strange and uncanny type of beauty. She was very much admired. She felt it, and it pleased her. The young man who took her in, a subaltern of engineers, had no eyes for any one else; while old Admiral Wade, who sat opposite her with a plain and skinny dowager, made her positively uncomfortable by the persistent way in which he stared at her simple pearl necklet.

After dinner, the tableaux. They had been designed and managed by a famous Royal Academician, and were mostly got up by the members of the house-party. But two or three actresses from London had been specially invited to help in a few of the more mythological scenes; for, indeed, Mrs. West had prepared the entire entertainment with that topsy-turvy conscientiousness and scrupulous sense of responsibility to society which pervaded her view of millionaire morality. Having once decided to offer the county a set of tableaux, she felt that millionaire morality absolutely demanded of her the sacrifice of three weeks' time and several hundred

pounds' money in order to discharge her obligations to the county with becoming magnificence.

The first tableau, Maisie learned from the gorgeous programme, was *Jephthah's Daughter*. The subject was represented at the pathetic moment when the doomed virgin goes forth from her father's house with her attendant maidens to bewail her virginity for two months upon the mountains, before the fulfilment of the awful vow which bound her father to offer her up for a burnt offering. Maisie thought it too solemn and tragic a scene for a festive occasion. But the famous R.A. had a taste for such themes, and his grouping was certainly most effectively dramatic.

"A perfect symphony in white and grey," said Mr. Wills, the art critic.

"How awfully affecting!" said most of the young girls.

"Reminds me a little too much, my dear, of old Bessie's stories," Mrs. West whispered low, leaning from her seat across two rows to Maisie.

A piano stood a little on one side of the platform, just in front of the curtain. The intervals between the pieces were filled up with songs, which, however, had been evidently arranged in keeping with the solemn and half-mystical tone of the tableaux. It is the habit of amateurs to take a long time in getting their scenes in order, so the interposition of the music was a happy thought as far as its prime intention went. But Maisie wondered they could not have chosen some livelier song for Christmas Eve than *Oh, Mary, go and call the cattle home, and call the cattle home, and call the cattle home, across the sands of Dee*. Her own name was Mary when she signed it officially, and the sad lilt of the last line, *But never home came she*, rang unpleasantly in her ear through the rest of the evening.

The second tableau was the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*. It was admirably rendered. The cold and dignified father, standing, apparently unmoved, by the pyre; the cruel faces of the attendant priests; the shrinking form of the immolated princess; the mere blank curiosity and inquiring interest of the helmeted heroes looking on, to whom this slaughter of a virgin victim was but an ordinary incident of the Achean religion. All these had been arranged by the Academical director with consummate skill and pictorial cleverness. But the group that attracted Maisie most among the components of the scene was that of the attendant maidens, more conspicuous here in their flowing white chitons than even they had been when posed as companions of the beautiful and ill-fated Hebrew victim. Two in particular excited her close attention—two very graceful and spiritual-looking girls, in long white robes of no particular age or country, who stood at the very end near the right edge of the picture. "How lovely they are, the two last on the right!" Maisie whispered to her neighbour—an Oxford undergraduate with a budding moustache. "I do so admire them!"

"Do you?" he answered, fondling the moustache with one dubious finger. "Well, now, do you know, I don't think I do. They're rather coarse-looking. And besides, I don't quite like the way they've got their hair done up in bunches; too fashionable, isn't it?—too much of the present day—I don't care to see a girl in a Greek costume, with her coiffure so evidently turned out by Truefitt's!"

"Oh, I don't mean those two," Maisie answered, a little shocked he should think she had picked out such meretricious faces; "I mean the two beyond them again—the two with their hair so simply and sweetly done—the ethereal-looking dark girls."

The undergraduate opened his mouth, and stared at her in blank amazement for a moment. "Well, I don't see—?" he began, and broke off suddenly. Something in Maisie's eye seemed to give him pause. He fondled his moustache, hesitated and was silent.

"How nice to have read the Greek and know what it all means!" Maisie went on, after a minute. "It's a human sacrifice, of course; but, please, what is the story?"

The undergraduate hummed and hawed. "Well, it's in Euripides, you know," he said, trying to look impressive, "and—er—and I haven't taken up Euripides for my next examination. But I think it's like this. Iphigenia was a daughter of Agamemnon's, don't you know, and he had offended Artemis or somebody—some other Goddess; and he vowed to offer up to her the most beautiful thing that should be born that year, by way of reparation—just like Jephthah. Well, Iphigenia was considered the most beautiful product of the particular twelvemonth—don't look at me like that, please! you—you make me nervous—and so, when the young woman grew up—well, I don't quite recollect the ins and outs of the details, but it's a human sacrifice business, don't you see; and they're just going to kill her, though I believe a hind was finally substituted for the girl, like the ram for Isaac; but I must confess I've a very vague recollection of it." He rose from his seat uneasily. "I'm afraid," he went on, shuffling about for an excuse to move, "these chairs are too close. I seem to be incommoding you."

He moved away with a furtive air. At the end of the tableau one or two of the characters who were not needed in succeeding pieces came down from the stage and joined the body of spectators, as they often do, in their character-dresses—a good opportunity, in point of fact, for retaining through the evening the advantages conferred by theatrical costume, rouge, and pearl-powder. Among them the two girls Maisie had admired so much glided quietly toward her and took the two vacant seats on either side, one of which had just been quitted by the awkward undergraduate. They were not only beautiful in face and figure, on a closer view, but Maisie found them from the first extremely sympathetic. They burst into talk with her, frankly and at once, with charming ease and grace of manner. They were ladies in the grain, in instinct and breeding. The taller of the two, whom the other addressed as Yolande, seemed particularly pleasing. The very name charmed Maisie. She was friends with them at once. They both possessed a certain nameless attraction that constitutes in itself the best possible introduction. Maisie hesitated to ask them whence they came, but it was clear from their talk they knew Wolverden intimately.

After a minute the piano struck up once more. A famous Scotch vocalist, in a diamond necklet and a dress to match, took her place on the stage, just in front of the footlights. As chance would have it, she began singing the song Maisie most of all hated. It was Scott's ballad of *Proud Maisie*, set to music by Carlo Ludovici—

*"Proud Maisie is in the wood.
Walking so early;
Sweet Robin sits on the bush.
Singing so rarely.
'Tell me, thou bonny bird.
When shall I marry me?'*

'When six braw gentlemen
Kirkward shall carry ye.'
'Who makes the bridal bed.
Birdie, say truly—'
'The grey-headed sexton
That delves the grave duly.
'The glow-worm o'er grave and stone
Shall light thee steady;
'The owl from the steeple sing.
Welcome, Proud lady."

Maisie listened to the song with grave discomfort. She had never liked it, and to-night it appalled her. She did not know that just at that moment Mrs. West was whispering in a perfect fever of apology to a lady by her side, "Oh dear! oh dear! what a dreadful thing of me ever to have permitted that song to be sung here to-night! It was horribly thoughtless! Why, now I remember, Miss Llewelyn's name, you know, is Maisie! And there she is listening to it with a face like a sheet! I shall never forgive myself!"

The tall, dark girl by Maisie's side, whom the other called Yolande, leaned across to her sympathetically. "You don't like that song?" she said, with just a tinge of reproach in her voice as she said it.

"I hate it!" Maisie answered, trying hard to compose herself.

"Why so?" the tall, dark girl asked, in a tone of calm and singular sweetness. "It is sad, perhaps; but it's lovely—and natural!"

"My own name is Maisie," her new friend replied, with an ill-repressed shudder. "And somehow that song pursues me through life I seem always to hear the horrid ring of the words, 'When six braw gentlemen kirkward shall carry ye.' I wish to Heaven my people had never called me Maisie!"

"And yet why?" the tall, dark girl asked again, with a sad, mysterious air. "Why this clinging to life—this terror of death—this inexplicable attachment to a world of misery? And with such eyes as yours, too! Your eyes are like mine!" which was a compliment, certainly, for the dark girl's own pair were strangely deep and lustrous. "People with eyes such as those, that can look into futurity, ought not surely to shrink from a mere gate like death! For death is but a gate—the gate of life in its fullest beauty. It is written over the door, *Mors janua vit.*"

"What door?" Maisie asked, for she remembered having read those selfsame words, and tried in vain to translate them, that very day, though the meaning was now clear to her.

The answer electrified her: "The gate of the vault in Wolverden churchyard."

She said it very low, but with pregnant expression.

"Oh, how dreadful!" Maisie exclaimed, drawing back. The tall, dark girl half frightened her.

"Not at all," the girl answered. "This life is so short, so vain, so transitory! And beyond it is peace—eternal peace—the calm of rest—the joy of the spirit."

"You come to anchor at last," her companion added.

"But if—one has somebody one would not wish to leave behind?" Maisie suggested timidly.

"He will follow before long," the dark girl replied with quiet decision, interpreting rightly the sex of the indefinite substantive. "Time passes so quickly. And if time passes quickly in time, how much more, then, in eternity!"

"Hush, Yolande," the other dark girl put in, with a warning glance; "there's a new tableau coming. Let me see, is this *The Death of Ophelia*—No, that's number four; this is number three, *The Martyrdom of St. Agnes*."

III

"My dear," Mrs. West said, positively oozing apology, when she met Maisie in the supper-room, "I'm afraid you've been left in a corner by yourself almost all the evening!"

"Oh dear, no," Maisie answered with a quiet smile. "I had that Oxford undergraduate at my elbow at first; and afterwards those two nice girls, with the flowing white dresses and the beautiful eyes, came and sat beside me. What's their name, I wonder?"

"Which girls?" Mrs. West asked, with a little surprise in her tone, for her impression was rather that Maisie had been sitting between two empty chairs for the greater part of the evening, muttering at times to herself in the most uncanny way, but not talking to anybody.

Maisie glanced round the room in search of her new friends, and for some time could not see them. At last, she observed them in a remote alcove, drinking red wine by themselves out of Venetian-glass beakers. "Those two," she said, pointing towards them. "They 're such charming girls! Can you tell me who they are? I've quite taken a fancy to them."

Mrs. West gazed at them for a second—or rather, at the recess towards which Maisie pointed—and then turned to Maisie with much the same oddly embarrassed look and manner as the undergraduate's. "Oh, those!" she said slowly, peering through and through her, Maisie thought. "Those—must be some of the professionals from London. At any rate—I'm not sure which you mean—over there by the curtain, in the Moorish nook, you say—well, I can't tell you their names! So they must be professionals."

She went off with a singularly frightened manner. Maisie noticed it and wondered at it. But it made no great or lasting impression.

When the party broke up, about midnight or a little later, Maisie went along the corridor to her own bedroom. At the end, by the door, the two other girls happened to be standing, apparently gossiping.

"Oh, you've not gone home yet?" Maisie said, as she passed, to Yolande.

"No, we're stopping here," the dark girl with the speaking eyes answered.

Maisie paused for a second. Then an impulse burst over her. "Will you come and see my room?" she asked, a little timidly.

"Shall we go, Hedda?" Yolande said, with an inquiring glance at her companion.

Her friend nodded assent. Maisie opened the door, and ushered them into her bedroom.

The ostentatiously opulent fire was still burning brightly, the electric light flooded the room with its brilliancy, the curtains were drawn, and the shutters fastened. For a while the three girls sat together by the hearth and gossiped quietly. Maisie liked her new friends—their voices were so gentle, soft, and sympathetic, while for face and figure they might have sat as models to Burne-Jones or Botticelli. Their dresses, too, took her delicate Welsh fancy; they were so dainty, yet so simple. The soft silk fell in natural folds and dimples. The only ornaments they wore were two curious brooches of very antique workmanship—as Maisie supposed—somewhat Celtic in design, and enamelled in blood-red on a gold background. Each carried a flower laid loosely in her bosom. Yolande's was an orchid with long, floating streamers, in colour and shape recalling some Southern lizard; dark purple spots dappled its lip and petals. Hedda's was a flower of a sort Maisie had never before seen—the stem spotted like a viper's skin, green flecked with russet-brown, and uncanny to look upon; on either side, great twisted spirals of red-and-blue blossoms, each curled after the fashion of a scorpion's tail, very strange and lurid. Something weird and witch-like about flowers and dresses rather attracted Maisie; they affected her with the half-repellent fascination of a snake for a bird; she felt such blossoms were fit for incantations and sorceries. But a lily-of-the-valley in Yolande's dark hair gave a sense of purity which assorted better with the girl's exquisitely calm and nun-like beauty.

After a while Hedda rose. "This air is close," she said. "It ought to be warm outside to-night, if one may judge by the sunset. May I open the window?"

"Oh, certainly, if you like," Maisie answered, a vague foreboding now struggling within her against innate politeness.

Hedda drew back the curtains and unfastened the shutters. It was a moonlit evening. The breeze hardly stirred the bare boughs of the silver birches. A sprinkling of soft snow on the terrace and the hills just whitened the ground. The moon lighted it up, falling full upon the Hall; the church and tower below stood silhouetted in dark against a cloudless expanse of starry sky in the background. Hedda opened the window. Cool, fresh air blew in, very soft and genial, in spite of the snow and the lateness of the season. "What a glorious night!" she said, looking up at Orion overhead. "Shall we stroll out for a while in it?"

If the suggestion had not thus been thrust upon her from outside, it would never have occurred to Maisie to walk abroad in a strange place, in evening dress, on a winter's night, with snow whitening the ground; but Hedda's voice sounded so sweetly persuasive, and the idea itself seemed so natural now she had once proposed it, that Maisie followed her two new friends on to the moonlit terrace without a moment's hesitation.

They paced once or twice up and down the gravelled walks. Strange to say, though a sprinkling of dry snow powdered the ground under foot, the air itself was soft and balmy. Stranger still, Maisie noticed, almost without noticing it, that though they walked three abreast, only one pair of footprints—her own—lay impressed on the snow in a long trail when they turned at either end and re-paced the platform. Yolande and Hedda must step lightly indeed; or perhaps her own feet might be warmer or thinner shod, so as to melt the light layer of snow more readily.

The girls slipped their arms through hers. A little thrill coursed through her. Then, after three or four turns up and down the terrace, Yolande led the way quietly down the broad flight of steps in the direction of the church on the lower level. In that bright, broad moonlight Maisie went with them undeterred; the Hall was still alive with the glare of electric lights in bedroom windows; and the presence of the other girls, both wholly free from any signs of fear, took off all sense of terror or loneliness. They strolled on into the churchyard. Maisie's eyes were now fixed on the new white tower, which merged in the silhouette against the starry sky into much the same grey and indefinite hue as the older parts of the building. Before she quite knew where she was, she found herself at the head of the worn stone steps which led into the vault by whose doors she had seen old Bessie sitting. In the pallid moonlight, with the aid of the greenish reflection from the snow, she could just read the words inscribed over the portal, the words that Yolande had repeated in the drawing-room, "Mors janua vit."

Yolande moved down one step. Maisie drew back for the first time with a faint access of alarm. "You're—you're not going down there!" she exclaimed, catching her breath for a second.

"Yes, I am," her new friend answered in a calmly quiet voice. "Why not? We live here."

"You live here?" Maisie echoed, freeing her arms by a sudden movement and standing away from her mysterious friends with a tremulous shudder.

"Yes, we live here," Hedda broke in, without the slightest emotion. She said it in a voice of perfect calm, as one might say it of any house in a street in London.

Maisie was far less terrified than she might have imagined beforehand would be the case under such unexpected conditions. The two girls were so simple, so natural, so strangely like herself, that she could not say she was really afraid of them. She shrank, it is true, from the nature of the door at which they stood, but she received the unearthly announcement that they lived there with scarcely more than a slight tremor of surprise and astonishment.

"You will come in with us?" Hedda said in a gently enticing tone. "We went into your bedroom."

Maisie hardly liked to say no. They seemed so anxious to show her their home. With trembling feet she moved down the first step, and then the second. Yolande kept ever one pace in front of her. As Maisie reached the third step, the two girls, as if moved by one design, took her wrists in their hands, not unkindly, but coaxingly. They reached the actual doors of the vault itself—two heavy bronze valves, meeting in the centre. Each bore a ring for a handle, pierced through a Gorgon's head embossed upon the surface. Yolande pushed them with her hand. They yielded instantly to her light touch, and opened inward. Yolande, still in front, passed from the glow of the moon to the gloom of the vault, which a ray of moonlight just descended obliquely. As she passed, for a second, a weird sight met Maisie's eyes. Her face and hands and dress became momentarily self-luminous—but through them, as they glowed, she could descry within every bone and joint of her living skeleton, dimly shadowed in dark through the luminous haze that marked her body.

Maisie drew back once more, terrified. Yet her terror was not quite what one could describe as fear: it was rather a vague sense of the profoundly mystical. "I

can't! I can't!" she cried, with an appealing glance. "Hedda! Yolande! I cannot go with you."

Hedda held her hand tight, and almost seemed to force her. But Yolande, in front, like a mother with her child, turned round with a grave smile. "No, no," she said reprovingly. "Let her come if she will, Hedda, of her own accord, not otherwise. The tower demands a willing victim."

Her hand on Maisie's wrist was strong but persuasive. It drew her without exercising the faintest compulsion. "Will you come with us, dear?" she said, in that winning silvery tone which had captivated Maisie's fancy from the very first moment they spoke together. Maisie gazed into her eyes. They were deep and tender. A strange resolution seemed to nerve her for the effort. "Yes, yes—I—will—come—with you," she answered slowly.

Hedda on one side, Yolande on the other, now went before her, holding her wrists in their grasp, but rather enticing than drawing her. As each reached the gloom, the same luminous appearance which Maisie had noticed before spread over their bodies, and the same weird skeleton shape showed faintly through their limbs in darker shadow. Maisie crossed the threshold with a convulsive gasp. As she crossed it she looked down at her own dress and body. They were semi-transparent, like the others', though not quite so self-luminous; the framework of her limbs appeared within in less certain outline, yet quite dark and distinguishable.

The doors swung to of themselves behind her. Those three stood alone in the vault of Wolverden.

Alone, for a minute or two; and then, as her eyes grew accustomed to the grey dusk of the interior, Maisie began to perceive that the vault opened out into a large and beautiful hall or crypt, dimly lighted at first, but becoming each moment more vaguely clear and more dreamily definite. Gradually she could make out great rock-hewn pillars, Romanesque in their outline or dimly Oriental, like the sculptured columns in the caves of Ellora, supporting a roof of vague and uncertain dimensions, more or less strangely dome-shaped. The effect on the whole was like that of the second impression produced by some dim cathedral, such as Chartres or Milan, after the eyes have grown accustomed to the mellow light from the stained-glass windows, and have recovered from the blinding glare of the outer sunlight. But the architecture, if one may call it so, was more mosque-like and magical. She turned to her companions. Yolande and Hedda stood still by her side; their bodies were now self-luminous to a greater degree than even at the threshold; but the terrible transparency had disappeared altogether; they were once more but beautiful though strangely transfigured and more than mortal women.

Then Maisie understood in her own soul, dimly, the meaning of those mystic words written over the portal. "Mors janua vit." Death is the gate of life; and also the interpretation of that awful vision of death dwelling within them as they crossed the threshold; for through that gate they had passed to this underground palace.

Her two guides still held her hands, one on either side. But they seemed rather to lead her on now, seductively and resistlessly, than to draw or compel her. As she moved in through the hall, with its endless vistas of shadowy pillars, seen now

behind, now in dim perspective, she was gradually aware that many other people crowded its aisles and corridors. Slowly they took shape as forms more or less clad, mysterious, varied, and of many ages. Some of them wore flowing robes, half mediaeval in shape, like the two friends who had brought her there. They looked like the saints on a stained-glass window. Others were girt merely with a light and floating Coan sash; while some stood dimly nude in the darker recesses of the temple or palace. All leaned eagerly forward with one mind as she approached, and regarded her with deep and sympathetic interest. A few of them murmured words—mere cabalistic sounds which at first she could not understand; but as she moved further into the hall, and saw at each step more clearly into the gloom, they began to have a meaning for her. Before long, she was aware that she understood the mute tumult of voices at once by some internal instinct. The Shades addressed her; she answered them. She knew by intuition what tongue they spoke; it was the Language of the Dead; and, by passing that portal with her two companions, she had herself become enabled both to speak and understand it.

A soft and flowing tongue, this speech of the Nether World—all vowels it seemed, without distinguishable consonants; yet dimly recalling every other tongue, and compounded, as it were, of what was common to all of them. It flowed from those shadowy lips as clouds issue inchoate from a mountain valley; it was formless, uncertain, vague, but yet beautiful. She hardly knew, indeed, as it fell upon her senses, if it were sound or perfume.

Through this tenuous world Maisie moved as in a dream, her two companions still cheering and guiding her. When they reached an inner shrine or chantry of the temple she was dimly conscious of more terrible forms pervading the background than any of those that had yet appeared to her. This was a more austere and antique apartment than the rest; a shadowy cloister, prehistoric in its severity; it recalled to her mind something indefinitely intermediate between the huge unwrought trilithons of Stonehenge and the massive granite pillars of Philaend Luxor. At the further end of the sanctuary a sort of Sphinx looked down on her, smiling mysteriously. At its base, on a rude megalithic throne, in solitary state, a High Priest was seated. He bore in his hand a wand or sceptre. All round, a strange court of half-unseen acolytes and shadowy hierophants stood attentive. They were girt, as she fancied, in what looked like leopards' skins, or in the fells of some earlier prehistoric lion. These wore sabre-shaped teeth suspended by a string round their dusky necks; others had ornaments of uncut amber, or hatchets of jade threaded as collars on a cord of sinew. A few, more barbaric than savage in type, flaunted torques of gold as armlets and necklets.

The High Priest rose slowly and held out his two hands, just level with his head, the palms turned outward. "You have brought a willing victim as Guardian of the Tower?" he asked, in that mystic tongue, of Yolande and Hedda.

"We have brought a willing victim," the two girls answered.

The High Priest gazed at her. His glance was piercing. Maisie trembled less with fear than with a sense of strangeness, such as a neophyte might feel on being first presented at some courtly pageant. "You come of your own accord?" the Priest inquired of her in solemn accents.

"I come of my own accord," Maisie answered, with an inner consciousness that she was bearing her part in some immemorial ritual. Ancestral memories seemed to stir within her.

"It is well," the Priest murmured. Then he turned to her guides. "She is of royal lineage?" he inquired, taking his wand in his hand again.

"She is a Llewelyn," Yolande answered, "of royal lineage, and of the race that, after your own, earliest bore sway in this land of Britain. She has in her veins the blood of Arthur, of Ambrosius, and of Vortigern."

"It is well," the Priest said again. "I know these princes." Then he turned to Maisie. "This is the ritual of those who build," he said, in a very deep voice. "It has been the ritual of those who build from the days of the builders of Lokmariaker and Avebury. Every building man makes shall have its human soul, the soul of a virgin to guard and protect it. Three souls it requires as a living talisman against chance and change. One soul is the soul of the human victim slain beneath the foundation-stone; she is the guardian spirit against earthquake and ruin. One soul is the soul of the human victim slain when the building is half built up; she is the guardian spirit against battle and tempest. One soul is the soul of the human victim who flings herself of her own free will off tower or gable when the building is complete; she is the guardian spirit against thunder and lightning. Unless a building be duly fasted with these three, how can it hope to stand against the hostile powers of fire and flood and storm and earthquake?"

An assessor at his side, unnoticed till then, took up the parable. He had a stern Roman face, and bore a shadowy suit of Roman armour. "In times of old," he said, with iron austerity, "all men knew well these rules of building. They built in solid stone to endure for ever: the works they erected have lasted to this day, in this land and others. So built we the amphitheatres of Rome and Verona; so built we the walls of Lincoln, York, and London. In the blood of a king's son laid we the foundation-stone: in the blood of a king's son laid we the coping-stone: in the blood of a maiden of royal line fasted we the bastions against fire and lightning. But in these latter days, since faith grows dim, men build with burnt brick and rubble of plaster; no foundation spirit or guardian soul do they give to their bridges, their walls, or their towers: so bridges break, and walls fall in, and towers crumble, and the art and mystery of building aright have perished from among you."

He ceased. The High Priest held out his wand and spoke again. "We are the Assembly of Dead Builders and Dead Victims," he said, "for this mark of Wolverden; all of whom have built or been built upon in this holy site of immemorial sanctity. We are the stones of a living fabric. Before this place was a Christian church, it was a temple of Woden. And before it was a temple of Woden, it was a shrine of Hercules. And before it was a shrine of Hercules, it was a grove of Nodens. And before it was a grove of Nodens, it was a Stone Circle of the Host of Heaven. And before it was a Stone Circle of the Host of Heaven, it was the grave and tumulus and underground palace of Me, who am the earliest builder of all in this place; and my name in my ancient tongue is Wolf, and I laid and hallowed it. And after me, Wolf, and my namesake Wulfhere, was this barrow called Ad Lupum and Wolverden. And all these that are here with me have built and been built

upon in this holy site for all generations. And you are the last who come to join us."

Maisie felt a cold thrill course down her spine as he spoke these words; but courage did not fail her. She was dimly aware that those who offer themselves as victims for service must offer themselves willingly; for the gods demand a voluntary victim; no beast can be slain unless it nod assent; and none can be made a guardian spirit who takes not the post upon him of his own free will. She turned meekly to Hedda. "Who are you?" she asked, trembling.

"I am Hedda," the girl answered, in the same soft sweet voice and winning tone as before; "Hedda, the daughter of Gorm, the chief of the Northmen who settled in East Anglia. And I was a worshipper of Thor and Odin. And when my father, Gorm, fought against Alfred, King of Wessex, was I taken prisoner. And Wulfhere, the Kenting, was then building the first church and tower of Wolverden. And they baptized me, and shrived me, and I consented of my own free will to be built under the foundation-stone. And there my body lies built up to this day; and I am the guardian spirit against earthquake and ruin."

"And who are you?" Maisie asked, turning again to Yolande.

"I am Yolande Fitz-Aylwin," the tall dark girl answered; "a royal maiden too, sprung from the blood of Henry Plantagenet. And when Roland Fitz-Stephen was building anew the choir and chancel of Wulfhere's minster, I chose to be immured in the fabric of the wall, for love of the Church and all holy saints; and there my body lies built up to this day; and I am the guardian against battle and tempest."

Maisie held her friend's hand tight. Her voice hardly trembled. "And I?" she asked once more. "What fate for me? Tell me!"

"Your task is easier far," Yolande answered gently. "For you shall be the guardian of the new tower against thunder and lightning. Now, those who guard against earthquake and battle are buried alive under the foundation-stone or in the wall of the building; there they die a slow death of starvation and choking. But those who guard against thunder and lightning cast themselves alive of their own free will from the battlements of the tower, and die in the air before they reach the ground; so their fate is the easiest and the lightest of all who would serve mankind; and thenceforth they live with us here in our palace."

Maisie clung to her hand still tighter. "Must I do it?" she asked, pleading.

"It is not must," Yolande replied in the same caressing tone, yet with a calmness as of one in whom earthly desires and earthly passions are quenched for ever. "It is as you choose yourself. None but a willing victim may be a guardian spirit. This glorious privilege comes but to the purest and best amongst us. Yet what better end can you ask for your soul than to dwell here in our midst as our comrade for ever, where all is peace, and to preserve the tower whose guardian you are from evil assaults of lightning and thunderbolt?"

Maisie flung her arms round her friend's neck. "But—I am afraid," she murmured. Why she should even wish to consent she knew not, yet the strange serene peace in these strange girls' eyes made her mysteriously in love with them and with the fate they offered her. They seemed to move like the stars in their orbits. "How shall I leap from the top?" she cried. "How shall I have courage to mount the stairs alone, and fling myself off from the lonely battlement?"

Yolande unwound her arms with a gentle forbearance. She coaxed her as one coaxes an unwilling child. "You will not be alone," she said, with a tender pressure. "We will all go with you. We will help you and encourage you. We will sing our sweet songs of life-in-death to you. Why should you draw back? All we have faced it in ten thousand ages, and we tell you with one voice, you need not fear it. 'Tis life you should fear—life, with its dangers, its toils, its heartbreakings. Here we dwell for ever in unbroken peace. Come, come, and join us!"

She held out her arms with an enticing gesture. Maisie sprang into them, sobbing. "Yes, I will come," she cried in an access of hysterical fervour. "These are the arms of Death—I embrace them. These are the lips of Death—I kiss them. Yolande, Yolande, I will do as you ask me!"

The tall dark girl in the luminous white robe stooped down and kissed her twice on the forehead in return. Then she looked at the High Priest. "We are ready," she murmured in a low, grave voice. "The Victim consents. The Virgin will die. Lead on to the tower. We are ready! We are ready!"

IV

From the recesses of the temple—if temple it were—from the inmost shrines of the shrouded cavern, unearthly music began to sound of itself; with wild modulation, on strange reeds and tabors. It swept through the aisles like a rushing wind on an aeolian harp; at times it wailed with a voice like a woman's; at times it rose loud in an organ-note of triumph; at times it sank low into a pensive and melancholy flute-like symphony. It waxed and waned; it swelled and died away again; but no man saw how or whence it proceeded. Wizard echoes issued from the crannies and vents in the invisible walls; they sighed from the ghostly interspaces of the pillars; they keened and moaned from the vast overhanging dome of the palace. Gradually the song shaped itself by weird stages into a processional measure. At its sound the High Priest rose slowly from his immemorial seat on the mighty cromlech which formed his throne. The Shades in leopards' skins ranged themselves in bodiless rows on either hand; the ghostly wearers of the sabre-toothed lions' fangs followed like ministrants in the footsteps of their hierarch.

Hedda and Yolande took their places in the procession. Maisie stood between the two, with hair floating on the air; she looked like a novice who goes up to take the veil, accompanied and cheered by two elder sisters.

The ghostly pageant began to move. Unseen music followed it with fitful gusts of melody. They passed down the main corridor, between shadowy Doric or Ionic pillars which grew dimmer and ever dimmer again in the distance as they approached, with slow steps, the earthward portal.

At the gate, the High Priest pushed against the valves with his hand. They opened outward.

He passed into the moonlight. The attendants thronged after him. As each wild figure crossed the threshold the same strange sight as before met Maisie's eyes. For a second of time each ghostly body became self-luminous, as with some

curious phosphorescence; and through each, at the moment of passing the portal, the dim outline of a skeleton loomed briefly visible. Next instant it had clothed itself as with earthly members.

Maisie reached the outer air. As she did so, she gasped. For a second, its chilliness and freshness almost choked her. She was conscious now that the atmosphere of the vault, though pleasant in its way, and warm and dry, had been loaded with fumes as of burning incense, and with somnolent vapours of poppy and mandragora. Its drowsy ether had cast her into a lethargy. But after the first minute in the outer world, the keen night air revived her. Snow lay still on the ground a little deeper than when she first came out, and the moon rode lower; otherwise, all was as before, save that only one or two lights still burned here and there in the great house on the terrace. Among them she could recognise her own room, on the ground floor in the new wing, by its open window.

The procession made its way across the churchyard towards the tower. As it wound among the graves an owl hooted. All at once Maisie remembered the lines that had so chilled her a few short hours before in the drawing-room—

*"The glow-worm o'er grave and stone
Shall light thee steady;
The owl from the steeple sing.
'Welcome, proud lady!"*

But, marvellous to relate, they no longer alarmed her. She felt rather that a friend was welcoming her home; she clung to Yolande's hand with a gentle pressure.

As they passed in front of the porch, with its ancient yew-tree, a stealthy figure glided out like a ghost from the darkling shadow. It was a woman, bent and bowed, with quivering limbs that shook half palsied. Maisie recognised old Bessie. "I knew she would come!" the old hag muttered between her toothless jaws. "I knew Wolverden Tower would yet be duly fasted!"

She put herself, as of right, at the head of the procession. They moved on to the tower, rather gliding than walking. Old Bessie drew a rusty key from her pocket, and fitted it with a twist into the brand-new lock. "What turned the old will turn the new," she murmured, looking round and grinning. Maisie shrank from her as she shrank from not one of the Dead; but she followed on still into the ringers' room at the base of the tower.

Thence a staircase in the corner led up to the summit. The High Priest mounted the stair, chanting a mystic refrain, whose runic sounds were no longer intelligible to Maisie. As she reached the outer air, the Tongue of the Dead seemed to have become a mere blank of mingled odours and murmurs to her. It was like a summer breeze, sighing through warm and resinous pinewoods. But Yolande and Hedda spoke to her yet, to cheer her, in the language of the living. She recognised that as revenants they were still in touch with the upper air and the world of the embodied.

They tempted her up the stair with encouraging fingers. Maisie followed them like a child, in implicit confidence. The steps wound round and round, spirally, and the staircase was dim; but a supernatural light seemed to fill the tower,

diffused from the bodies or souls of its occupants. At the head of all, the High Priest still chanted as he went his unearthly litany; magic sounds of chimes seemed to swim in unison with his tune as they mounted. Were those floating notes material or spiritual? They passed the belfry; no tongue of metal wagged; but the rims of the great bells resounded and reverberated to the ghostly symphony with sympathetic music. Still they passed on and on, upward and upward. They reached the ladder that alone gave access to the final story. Dust and cobwebs already clung to it. Once more Maisie drew back. It was dark overhead and the luminous haze began to fail them. Her friends held her hands with the same kindly persuasive touch as ever. "I cannot!" she cried, shrinking away from the tall, steep ladder. "Oh, Yolande, I cannot!"

"Yes, dear," Yolande whispered in a soothing voice. "You can. It is but ten steps, and I will hold your hand tight. Be brave and mount them!"

The sweet voice encouraged her. It was like heavenly music. She knew not why she should submit, or, rather, consent; but none the less she consented. Some spell seemed cast over her. With tremulous feet, scarcely realising what she did, she mounted the ladder and went up four steps of it.

Then she turned and looked down again. Old Bessie's wrinkled face met her frightened eyes. It was smiling horribly. She shrank back once more, terrified. "I can't do it," she cried, "if that woman comes up! "I'm not afraid of you, dear," she pressed Yolande's hand, "but she, she is too terrible!"

Hedda looked back and raised a warning finger. "Let the woman stop below," she said; "she savours too much of the evil world. We must do nothing to frighten the willing victim."

The High Priest by this time, with his ghostly fingers, had opened the trap-door that gave access to the summit. A ray of moonlight slanted through the aperture. The breeze blew down with it. Once more Maisie felt the stimulating and reviving effect of the open air. Vivified by its freshness, she struggled up to the top, passed out through the trap, and found herself standing on the open platform at the summit of the tower.

The moon had not yet quite set. The light on the snow shone pale green and mysterious. For miles and miles around she could just make out, by its aid, the dim contour of the downs, with their thin white mantle, in the solemn silence. Range behind range rose faintly shimmering. The chant had now ceased; the High Priest and his acolytes were mingling strange herbs in a mazar-bowl or chalice. Stray perfumes of myrrh and of cardamoms were wafted towards her. The men in leopards' skins burnt smouldering sticks of spikenard. Then Yolande led the postulant forward again, and placed her close up to the new white parapet. Stone heads of virgins smiled on her from the angles. "She must front the east," Hedda said in a tone of authority: and Yolande turned her face towards the rising sun accordingly. Then she opened her lips and spoke in a very solemn voice. "From this new-built tower you fling yourself," she said, or rather intoned, "that you may serve mankind, and all the powers that be, as its guardian spirit against thunder and lightning. Judged a virgin, pure and unsullied in deed and word and thought, of royal race and ancient lineage—a Cymry of the Cymry—you are found worthy to be intrusted with this charge and this honour. Take care that never shall dart or thunderbolt assault this tower, as She that is below you takes care to preserve it

from earthquake and ruin, and She that is midway takes care to preserve it from battle and tempest. This is your charge. See well that you keep it."

She took her by both hands. "Mary Llewelyn," she said, "you willing victim, step on to the battlement."

Maisie knew not why, but with very little shrinking she stepped as she was told, by the aid of a wooden footstool, on to the eastward-looking parapet. There, in her loose white robe, with her arms spread abroad, and her hair flying free, she poised herself for a second, as if about to shake out some unseen wings and throw herself on the air like a swift or a swallow.

"Mary Llewelyn," Yolande said once more, in a still deeper tone, with ineffable earnestness, "cast yourself down, a willing sacrifice, for the service of man, and the security of this tower against thunderbolt and lightning."

Maisie stretched her arms wider, and leaned forward in act to leap, from the edge of the parapet, on to the snow-clad churchyard.

V

One second more and the sacrifice would have been complete. But before she could launch herself from the tower, she felt suddenly a hand laid upon her shoulder from behind to restrain her. Even in her existing state of nervous exaltation she was aware at once that it was the hand of a living and solid mortal, not that of a soul or guardian spirit. It lay heavier upon her than Hedda's or Yolande's. It seemed to clog and burden her. With a violent effort she strove to shake herself free, and carry out her now fixed intention of self-immolation, for the safety of the tower. But the hand was too strong for her. She could not shake it off. It gripped and held her.

She yielded, and, reeling, fell back with a gasp on to the platform of the tower. At the selfsame moment a strange terror and commotion seemed to seize all at once on the assembled spirits. A weird cry rang voiceless through the shadowy company. Maisie heard it as in a dream, very dim and distant. It was thin as a bat's note; almost inaudible to the ear, yet perceived by the brain or at least by the spirit. It was a cry of alarm, of fright, of warning. With one accord, all the host of phantoms rushed hurriedly forward to the battlements and pinnacles. The ghostly High Priest went first, with his wand held downward; the men in leopards' skins and other assistants followed in confusion. Theirs was a reckless rout. They flung themselves from the top, like fugitives from a cliff, and floated fast through the air on invisible pinions. Hedda and Yolande, ambassadors and intermediaries with the upper air, were the last to fly from the living presence. They clasped her hand silently, and looked deep into her eyes. There was something in that calm yet regretful look that seemed to say, "Farewell! We have tried in vain to save you, sister, from the terrors of living."

The horde of spirits floated away on the air, as in a witches' Sabbath, to the vault whence it issued. The doors swung on their rusty hinges, and closed behind them. Maisie stood alone with the hand that grasped her on the tower.

The shock of the grasp, and the sudden departure of the ghostly band in such wild dismay, threw Maisie for a while into a state of semi-unconsciousness. Her head reeled round; her brain swam faintly. She clutched for support at the parapet of the tower. But the hand that held her sustained her still. She felt herself gently drawn down with quiet mastery, and laid on the stone floor close by the trap-door that led to the ladder.

The next thing of which she could feel sure was the voice of the Oxford undergraduate. He was distinctly frightened and not a little tremulous. "I think," he said very softly, laying her head on his lap, "you had better rest a while, Miss Llewelyn, before you try to get down again. I hope I didn't catch you and disturb you too hastily. But one step more, and you would have been over the edge. I really couldn't help it."

"Let me go," Maisie moaned, trying to raise herself again, but feeling too faint and ill to make the necessary effort to recover the power of motion. "I want to go with them! I want to join them!"

"Some of the others will be up before long," the undergraduate said, supporting her head in his hands; "and they'll help me to get you down again. Mr. Yates is in the belfry. Meanwhile, if I were you, I'd lie quite still, and take a drop or two of this brandy."

He held it to her lips. Maisie drank a mouthful, hardly knowing what she did. Then she lay quiet where he placed her for some minutes. How they lifted her down and conveyed her to her bed she scarcely knew. She was dazed and terrified. She could only remember afterward that three or four gentlemen in roughly huddled clothes had carried or handed her down the ladder between them. The spiral stair and all the rest were a blank to her.

VI

When she next awoke she was lying in her bed in the same room at the Hall, with Mrs. West by her side, leaning over her tenderly.

Maisie looked up through her closed eyes and just saw the motherly face and grey hair bending above her. Then voices came to her from the mist, vaguely: "Yesterday was so hot for the time of year, you see!" "Very unusual weather, of course, for Christmas." "But a thunderstorm! So strange! I put it down to that. The electrical disturbance must have affected the poor child's head." Then it dawned upon her that the conversation she heard was passing between Mrs. West and a doctor.

She raised herself suddenly and wildly on her arms. The bed faced the windows. She looked out and beheld—the tower of Wolverden church, rent from top to bottom with a mighty rent, while half its height lay tossed in fragments on the ground in the churchyard.

"What is it?" she cried wildly, with a flush as of shame.

"Hush, hush!" the doctor said. "Don't trouble! Don't look at it!"

"Was it? after I came down?" Maisie moaned in vague terror.

The doctor nodded. "An hour after you were brought down," he said, "a thunderstorm broke over it. The lightning struck and shattered the tower. They had not yet put up the lightning-conductor. It was to have been done on Boxing Day."

A weird remorse possessed Maisie's soul. "My fault!" she cried, starting up. "My fault, my fault! I have neglected my duty!"

"Don't talk," the doctor answered, looking hard at her. "It is always dangerous to be too suddenly aroused from these curious overwrought sleeps and trances."

"And old Bessie?" Maisie exclaimed, trembling with an eerie presentiment.

The doctor glanced at Mrs. West. "How did she know?" he whispered. Then he turned to Maisie. "You may as well be told the truth as suspect it," he said slowly. "Old Bessie must have been watching there. She was crushed and half buried beneath the falling tower."

"One more question, Mrs. West," Maisie murmured, growing faint with an access of supernatural fear. "Those two nice girls who sat on the chairs at each side of me through the tableaux, are they hurt? Were they in it?"

Mrs. West soothed her hand. "My dear child," she said gravely, with quiet emphasis, "there were no other girls. This is mere hallucination. You sat alone by yourself through the whole of the evening."

