

The Glass of Supreme Moments

By Barry Pain

Lucas Morne sat in his college rooms, when the winter afternoon met the evening, depressed and dull. There were various reasons for his depression. He was beginning to be a little nervous about his health. A week before he had run second in a mile race, the finish of which had been a terrible struggle; ever since then any violent exertion or excitement had brought on symptoms which were painful, and to one who had always been strong, astonishing. He had felt them early that afternoon, on coming from the river. Besides, he was discontented with himself. He had had several men in his rooms that afternoon, who were better than he was, men who had enthusiasms and had found them satisfying. Lucas had a moderate devotion to athletics, but no great enthusiasm. Neither had he the finer perceptions. Neither was he a scholar. He was just an ordinary man, and reputed to be a good fellow.

His visitors had drunk his tea, talked of their own enthusiasms, and were now gone. Nothing is so unclean as a used tea-cup; nothing is so cold as toast which has once been hot, and the concrete expression of dejection is crumbs. Even Lucas Morne, who had not the finer perceptions, was dimly conscious that his room had become horrible, and now flung open the window. One of the men—a large, clumsy man—had been smoking mitigated Latakia; and Latakia has a way of rolling itself all round the atmosphere and kicking. Lucas seated himself in his easiest chair.

His rooms were near the chapel, and he could hear the organ. The music and the soft fall of the darkness were soothing; he could hardly see the used tea-cups now; the light from the gas-lamp outside came just a little way into the room, shyly and obliquely.

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Well, he had not noticed it before, but the fireplace had become a staircase. He felt too lazy to wonder much at this. He would, he thought, have the things all altered back again on the morrow. It would be worth while to sell the staircase, seeing that its steps were fashioned of silver and crystal. Unfortunately he could not see how much there was of it, or whither it led. The first five steps were clear enough; he felt convinced that the workmanship of them was Japanese. But the rest of the staircase was hidden from his sight by a gray veil of mist. He found himself a little angry, in a severe and strictly logical way, that in those days of boasted science we could not prevent a piece of fog, measuring ten feet by seven, from coming in at an open window and sitting down on a staircase which had only just begun to exist, and blotting out all but five steps of it in its very earliest moments. He allowed that it was a beautiful mist; its color changed slowly from gray to rose, and then back again from rose to gray; fire-flies of silver and gold shot through it at intervals; but it was a nuisance, because he wanted to see the rest of the staircase, and it prevented him. Every moment the desire to see more grew stronger. At last he determined to shake off his laziness, and go up the staircase and through the mist into the something beyond. He felt sure that the something beyond would be beautiful—sure with the certainty which has nothing to do with logical conviction.

It seemed to him that it was with an effort that he brought himself to rise from the chair and walk to the foot of that lovely staircase. He hesitated there for a moment or two, and as he did so he heard the sound of footsteps, high up, far away, yet coming nearer and nearer, with light music in the sound of them. Some one was coming down the staircase. He listened eagerly and excitedly. Then through the gray mist came a figure robed in gray.

It was the figure of a woman—young, with wonderful grace in her movements. Her face was veiled, and all that could be seen of her as she paused on the fifth step was the soft, dark hair that reached to her waist, and her arms—white wonders of beauty. The rest was hidden by the gray veil, and the long gray robe, that left, however, their suggestion of classical grace and slenderness. Lucas Morne stood looking at her tremulously. He felt sure, too, that she was looking at him, and that she could see through the folds of the thin gray veil that hid her face. She was the first to speak. Her voice in its gentleness and delicacy was like the voice of a child; it was only afterward that he heard in it the under-thrill which told of more than childhood.

“Why have you not come? I have been waiting for you, you know, up there. And this is the only time,” she added.

“I am very sorry,” he stammered. “You see—I never knew the staircase was there until to-day. In fact—it seems very stupid of me—but I always thought it was a fireplace. I must have been dreaming, of course. And then this afternoon I thought, or dreamed, that a lot of men came in to see me. Perhaps they really did come; and we got talking, you know—”

“Yes,” she said, with the gentlest possible interruption. “I *do* know. There was one man, Fynsale, large, ugly, clumsy, a year your senior. He sat in that chair over there, and sulked, and smoked Latakia. I rather like the smell of Latakia. He especially loves to write or to say some good thing; and at times he can do it. Therefore, you envy him. Then there was Blake. Blake is an athlete, like yourself, but is just a little more successful. Yes, I know you are good, but Blake is very good. You were tried for the 'Varsity—Blake was selected. He and Fynsale both have delight in ability, and you envy both. There was that dissenting little Paul Reece. He is not exactly in your set, but you were at school with him, and so you tolerate him. How good he is, for all his insignificance and social defects! Blake knows that, and kept a guard on his talk this afternoon. He would not offend Paul Reece for worlds. Paul's belief gives him earnestness, his earnestness leads him to self-sacrifice, and self-sacrifice is deep delight to him. You have more ability than Paul Reece, but you cannot reach that kind of enthusiastic happiness, and therefore you envy him. I could say similar things of the other men. It was because they made you vaguely dissatisfied with yourself that they bored you. You take pleasure—a certain pleasure—in athletics, and that pleasure would become an enthusiastic delight if you were a little better at them. Some men could get the enthusiastic delight out of as much as you can do, but your temperament is different. I know you well. You are not easily satisfied. You are not clever, but you are—” She paused, but without any sign of embarrassment.

“What am I?” he asked eagerly. He felt sure that it would be something good, and he was not less vain than other men.

“I do not think I will say—not now.”

“But who are you?” His diffidence and stammering had vanished beneath her calm, quiet talk. “You must let me at least ask that. Who are you? And how do you know all this?”

“I am a woman, but not an earth-woman. And the chief difference between us is that I know nearly all the things you do not know, and you do not know nearly all the things that I know. Sometimes I forget your ignorance—do not be angry for a word; there is no other for it, and it is not your fault. I forgot it just now when I asked you why you had not come to me up the staircase of silver and crystal, through the gray veil where the fire-flies live, and into that quiet room beyond. This is the only time; to-morrow it will not be possible. And I have——” Once more she paused. There was a charm for Lucas Morne in the things which she did not say. “Your room is dark,” she continued, “and I can hardly see you.”

“I will light the lamp,” said Lucas hurriedly, “and—and won’t you let me get you some tea?” He saw, as soon as he had said it, how unspeakably ludicrous this proffer of hospitality was. He almost fancied a smile, a moment’s shimmer of little white teeth, beneath the long gray veil. “Or shall I come now—at once?” he added.

“Come now; I will show you the mirror.”

“What is that?”

“You will understand when you see it. It is the glass of supreme moments. I shall tell you about it. But come.”

She looked graceful, and she suggested the most perfect beauty as she stood there, a slight figure against the background of gray mist, which had grown luminous as the room below grew darker. Lucas Morne went carefully up the five steps, and together they passed through the gray, misty curtain. He was wondering what the face was like which was hidden beneath that veil; would it be possible to induce her to remove the veil? He might, perhaps, lead the conversation thither—delicately and subtly.

“A cousin of mine,” he began, “who has travelled a good deal, once told me that the women of the East——”

“Yes,” she said, and her voice and way were so gentle that it hardly seemed like an interruption; “and so do I.”

He felt very much anticipated; for a moment he was driven back into the shy and stammering state. There were only a few more steps now, and then they entered through a rosy curtain into a room, which he supposed to be “that quiet room beyond,” of which she had spoken.

It was a large room, square in shape. The floor was covered with black and white tiles, with the exception of a small square space in the centre, which looked like silver, and over which a ripple seemed occasionally to pass. She pointed it out to him. “That,” she said, “is the glass of supreme moments.” There were no windows, and the soft light that filled the room seemed to come from that liquid silver mirror in the centre of the floor. The walls, which were lofty, were hung with curtains of different colors, all subdued, dreamy, reposeful. These colors were repeated in the painting of the ceiling. In a recess at the further end of the room there were seats, low seats on which one could sleep. There was a faint smell of syringa in the air, making it heavy and drowsy. Now and then one heard faintly, as if afar off, the great music of an organ. Could it, he found himself wondering, be the organ of the college chapel? It was restful and pleasant to bear. She drew him to one of the seats in the recess, and once more pointed to the mirror.

“All the ecstasy in the world lies reflected there. The supreme moments of each man’s life—the scene, the spoken words—all lie there. Past and present, and future—all are there.”

“Shall I be able to see them?”

“If you will.”

“And how?”

“Bend over the mirror, and say the name of the man or woman into whose life you wish to see. You only have to want it, and it will appear before your eyes. But there are some lives which have no supreme moments.”

“Commonplace lives?”

“Yes.”

Lucas Morne walked to the edge of the mirror and knelt down, looking into it. The ripple passed to and fro over the surface. For a moment he hesitated, doubting for whom he should ask; and then he said in a low voice: “Are there supreme moments in the life of Blake—Vincent Blake, the athlete?” The surface of the mirror suddenly grew still, and in it rose what seemed a living picture.

He could see once more the mile race in which he had been defeated by Blake. It was the third and last lap; and he himself was leading by some twenty yards, for Blake was waiting. There was a vast crowd of spectators, and he could hear every now and then the dull sound of their voices. He saw Vincent Blake slightly quicken his pace, and marked his own plucky attempt to answer it; he saw, too, that he had very little left in him. Gradually Blake drew up, until at a hundred yards from the finish there were not more than five yards between the two runners. Then he noticed his own fresh attempt. There were some fifty yards of desperate fighting, in which neither seemed to gain or lose an inch on the other. The voices of the excited crowd rose to a roar. And then—then Blake had it his own way. He saw himself passed a yard from the tape.

“Blake has always just beaten me,” he said savagely as he turned from the mirror.

He went back to his seat. “Tell me,” he said; “does that picture really represent the supreme moments of Blake’s life?”

“Yes,” answered the veiled woman, “he will have nothing quite like the ecstasy which he felt at winning that race. He will marry, and have children, and his married life will be happy, but the happiness will not be so intense. There is an emotion-meter outside this room, you know, which measures such things.”

“Now if one wanted to bet on a race,” he began. Then he stopped short. He had none of the finer perceptions, but it did not take these to show him that he was becoming a little inappropriate. “I will look again at the mirror,” he added after a pause. “I am afraid, though, that all this will make me more discontented with myself.”

Once more he looked into the glass of supreme moments. He murmured the name of Paul Reece, the good little dissenter, his old school-fellow. It was not in the power of accomplishment that Paul Reece excelled Lucas Morne, but only in the goodness and spirituality of his nature. As he looked, once more a picture formed on the surface of the mirror. It was of the future this time.

It was a sombre picture of the interior of a church. Through the open door one saw the snow falling slowly into the dusk of a winter afternoon. Within, before the richly decorated altar, flickered the little ruby flames of hanging lamps. On the walls, dim in the dying light, were painted the stations of the Cross. The fragrance of the incense smoke

still lingered in the air. He could see but one figure, bowed, black-robed, before the altar. "And is this Paul Reece—who was a dissenter?" he asked himself, knowing that it was he. Some one was seated at the organ, and the cry of the music was full of appeal, and yet full of peace: "*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi!*"

Then the picture died away, and once more the little ripple moved to and fro over the surface of the liquid silver mirror. Lucas went back again to his place. The veiled woman was leaning backward, her small white hands linked together. She did not speak, but he was sure that she was looking at him—looking at him intently. Slowly it came to him that there was in this woman a subtle, mastering attraction which he had never known before. And side by side with this thought there still remained the feeling which had filled him as he witnessed the supreme moments of Paul Reece, a paradoxical feeling which was half restlessness and half peace.

"I do not know if I envy Paul," he said, "but if so, it is not the envy which hurts. I shall never be like him. I can't feel, as he does. It's not in me. But this picture did not make me angry as the other did." He looked steadfastly at the graceful, veiled figure, and added in a lower tone: "When I spoke of the travels of my cousin a little while ago—over Palestine and Turkey, and thereabouts, you know—I had meant to lead up to a question, as you saw. I had meant to ask you if you would put away your veil and let me see your face. And there are many things which I want to know about you. May I not stay here by your side and talk?"

"Soon, very soon, I will talk with you, and after that you shall see me. What do think, then, of the glass of supreme moments?"

"It is wonderful. I only feared the sight of exquisite happiness in others would make me more discontented. At first you seemed to think that I was too dissatisfied."

"Do not be deceived. Do not think that these supreme moments are everything; for that life is easiest which is gentle, level, placid, and has no supreme moments. There is a picture in the life of your friend Fynsale which I wish you to see. Look at it in the mirror, and then I shall have something to tell you."

Lucas did as he was bidden. The mirror showed him a wretched, dingy room—sitting-room and bedroom combined—in a lodging-house. At a little rickety table, pushed in front of a very small fire, Fynsale sat writing by lamplight. The lamp was out of order apparently. The combined smell of lamp and Latakia was poignant. There was a pile of manuscript before him, and on the top of it he was placing the sheet he had just written. Then he rose from his chair, folded his arms on the mantelpiece, and bent down, with his head on his hands, looking into the fire. It was an uncouth attitude of which, Lucas remembered, Fynsale had been particularly fond when he was at college.

When the picture had passed, Lucas looked round, and saw that the veiled woman had left the recess, and was now standing by his side. "I do not understand this," he said. "How can those be the supreme moments in Fynsale's life? He looked poor and shabby, and the room was positively wretched. Where does the ecstasy come in?"

"He has just finished his novel; and he is quite madly in love with it. Some of it is very good, and some of it—from merely physical reasons—is very bad; he was half-starved when he was writing it, and it is not possible to write very well when one is half-starved. But he loves it. I am speaking of all this as if, like the picture of it, it was present; although, of course, it has not happened yet. But I will tell you more. I will show you, in this case at least, what these moments of ecstasy are worth. Some of Fynsale's book, I

have said, is very good, and some of it is very bad; but none of it is what people want. He will take it to publisher after publisher, and they will refuse it. After three years it will at last be published, and it will not succeed in the least. And all through these years of failure he will recall from time to time the splendid joy he felt at finishing that book, and how glad he was that he had made it. The thought of that past ecstasy will make the torture all the worse.”

“Perhaps, then, after all I should be glad that I am commonplace?” said Lucas.

“It does not always follow, though, that the commonplace people have commonplace lives. There have been men who have been so ordinary that it hurt one to have anything to do with them, and yet the gods have made them come into poetry.”

Once more Lucas fancied that a smile with magic in it might be fluttering under that gray veil. Every moment the fascination of this woman, whose face he had not seen, and with whom he had spoken for so short a time, grew stronger on him. He did not know from whence it came, whether it lay in the grace of her figure and her movements, or in the beauty of her long, dark hair, or in the music of her voice, or in that subtle, indefinable way in which she seemed to show him that she cared for him deeply. The room itself, quiet, mystical, restful, dedicated to the ecstasy of the world, had its effect upon his senses. More than ever before he felt himself impressed, tremulous with emotion. He knew that she saw how, in spite of himself, the look of adoration would come into his eyes.

And suddenly she, whom but a moment before he had imagined to be smiling at her own light thoughts, seemed swayed by a more serious impulse,

“You must be comforted, though, and be angry with yourself no longer. For you are *not* commonplace, because you know that you *are* commonplace. It is something to have wanted the right things, although the gods have given you no power to attain them, nor even the wit and words to make your want eloquent.” Her voice was deeper, touched with the under-thrill.

“This,” he said, “is the second time you have spoken of the gods—and yet we are in the nineteenth century.”

“Are we? I am very old and very young. Time is nothing to me; it does not change me. Yesterday in Italy each grave and stream spoke of divinity. ‘*Non omnis moriar,*’ sang one in confidence, ‘*Non omnis moriar!*’ I heard his voice, and now he is passed and gone from the world.”

“We read him still,” said Lucas Morne, with a little pride. He was not intending to take the classical tripos, but he had with the help of a translation read that ode from which she was quoting. She did not heed his interruption in the least. She went on speaking:

“And to-day in England there is but little which is sacred; yet here, too, my work is seen; and here, too, as they die, they cry, ‘I shall not die, but live!’

“You will think me stupid,” said Lucas Morne, a little bewildered, “but I really do not understand you. I do not follow you. I cannot see to what you refer.”

“That is because you do not know who I am. Before the end of to-day I think we shall understand each other well.”

There was a moment’s pause, and then Lucas Morne spoke again:

“You have told me that even in the lives of commonplace people there are sometimes supreme moments. I had scarcely hoped for them and you have bidden me not to desire them. Shall I—even I—know what ecstasy means?”

“Yes, yes; I think so.”

“Then let me see it, as I saw the rest pictured in the mirror.” He spoke with some hesitation, his eyes fixed on the tiled floor of the room.

“That need not be,” she answered, and she hardly seemed to have perfect control over the tones of her voice now. “That need not be, Lucas Morne, for the supreme moments of your life are here, here and now.”

He looked up, suddenly and excitedly. She had flung back the gray veil over her long, dark hair, and stood revealed before him, looking ardently into his eyes. Her face was paler than that of average beauty; the lips, shapely and scarlet, were just parted; but the eyes gave the most wonderful charm. They were like flames at midnight—not the soft, gray eyes that make men better, but the passionate eyes that make men forget honor, and reason, and everything. She stretched out both hands toward him, impulsively, appealingly. He grasped them in his own. His own hands were hot, burning; every nerve in them tingled with excitement. For a moment he held her at arm’s-length, looking at her, and said nothing. At last he found words:

“I knew that you would be like this. I think that I have loved you all my life. I wish that I might be with you forever.”

There was a strange expression on her face. She did not speak, but she drew him nearer to her.

“Tell me your name,” he said.

“Yesterday, where that poet lived—that confident poet—they called me Libitina; and here to-day, they call me Death. My name matters not, if you love me. For to you alone have I come thus. For the rest, I have done my work unseen. Only in this hour—only in this hour—was it possible.”

He had hardly heeded what she said. He bent down over her face.

“Stay!” she said in a hurried whisper; “if you kiss me you will die.”

He smiled triumphantly. “But I shall die kissing you,” he said. And so their lips met. Her lips were scarlet, but they were icy cold.

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The captain of the football team had just come out of evening chapel, his gown slung over his arm, his cap pulled over his eyes, looking good-tempered, and strong, and jolly, but hardly devotional. He saw the window of Morne’s rooms open—they were on the ground-floor—and looked in. By the glow of the failing fire he saw what he thought was Lucas Morne seated in a lounge-chair. He called to him, but there was no answer. “The old idiot’s asleep,” he said to himself, as he climbed in at the window. “Wake up, old man,” he cried, as he put his hand on the shoulder of Lucas Morne’s body, and swung it forward; “wake up, old man.”

The body rolled forward and fell sideways to the ground heavily and clumsily. It lay there motionless.