

Man-Size in Marble,  
and The Ebony Frame

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Edith Nesbit

**D O D O**  **P R E S S**

Man-Size in Marble

Although every word of this story is as true as despair, I do not expect people to believe it. Nowadays a “rational explanation” is required before belief is possible. Let me then, at once, offer the “rational explanation” which finds most favour among those who have heard the tale of my life’s tragedy. It is held that we were “under a delusion,” Laura and I, on that 31st of October; and that this supposition places the whole matter on a satisfactory and believable basis. The reader can judge, when he, too, has heard my story, how far this is an “explanation,” and in what sense it is “rational.” There were three who took part in this: Laura and I and another man. The other man still lives, and can speak to the truth of the least credible part of my story.

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I never in my life knew what it was to have as much money as I required to supply the most ordinary needs—good colours, books, and cab-fares—and when we were married we knew quite well that we should only be able to live at all by “strict punctuality and attention to business.” I used to paint in those days, and Laura used to write, and we felt sure we could keep the pot at least simmering. Living in town was out of the question, so we went to look for a cottage in the country, which should be at once sanitary and picturesque. So rarely do these two qualities meet in one cottage that our search was for some time quite fruitless. We tried advertisements, but

most of the desirable rural residences which we did look at proved to be lacking in both essentials, and when a cottage chanced to have drains it always had stucco as well and was shaped like a tea-caddy. And if we found a vine or rose-covered porch, corruption invariably lurked within. Our minds got so befogged by the eloquence of house-agents and the rival disadvantages of the fever-traps and outrages to beauty which we had seen and scorned, that I very much doubt whether either of us, on our wedding morning, knew the difference between a house and a haystack. But when we got away from friends and house-agents, on our honeymoon, our wits grew clear again, and we knew a pretty cottage when at last we saw one. It was at Brenzett—a little village set on a hill over against the southern marshes. We had gone there, from the seaside village where we were staying, to see the church, and two fields from the church we found this cottage. It stood quite by itself, about two miles from the village. It was a long, low building, with rooms sticking out in unexpected places. There was a bit of stone-work—ivy-covered and moss-grown, just two old rooms, all that was left of a big house that had once stood there—and round this stone-work the house had grown up. Stripped of its roses and jasmine it would have been hideous. As it stood it was charming, and after a brief examination we took it. It was absurdly cheap. The rest of our honeymoon we spent in grubbing about in second-hand shops in the county town, picking up bits of old oak and Chippendale chairs for our furnishing. We wound up with a run up to town and a visit to Liberty's, and soon the low oak-beamed lattice-windowed rooms began to be home. There was a jolly old-fashioned garden, with

grass paths, and no end of hollyhocks and sunflowers, and big lilies. From the window you could see the marsh-pastures, and beyond them the blue, thin line of the sea. We were as happy as the summer was glorious, and settled down into work sooner than we ourselves expected. I was never tired of sketching the view and the wonderful cloud effects from the open lattice, and Laura would sit at the table and write verses about them, in which I mostly played the part of foreground.

We got a tall old peasant woman to do for us. Her face and figure were good, though her cooking was of the homeliest; but she understood all about gardening, and told us all the old names of the coppices and cornfields, and the stories of the smugglers and highwaymen, and, better still, of the "things that walked," and of the "sights" which met one in lonely glens of a starlight night. She was a great comfort to us, because Laura hated housekeeping as much as I loved folklore, and we soon came to leave all the domestic business to Mrs. Dorman, and to use her legends in little magazine stories which brought in the jingling guinea.

We had three months of married happiness, and did not have a single quarrel. One October evening I had been down to smoke a pipe with the doctor—our only neighbour—a pleasant young Irishman. Laura had stayed at home to finish a comic sketch of a village episode for the Monthly Marplot. I left her laughing over her own jokes, and came in to find her a crumpled heap of pale muslin weeping on the window seat.

“Good heavens, my darling, what’s the matter?” I cried, taking her in my arms. She leaned her little dark head against my shoulder and went on crying. I had never seen her cry before—we had always been so happy, you see—and I felt sure some frightful misfortune had happened.

“What is the matter? Do speak.”

“It’s Mrs. Dorman,” she sobbed.

“What has she done?” I inquired, immensely relieved.

“She says she must go before the end of the month, and she says her niece is ill; she’s gone down to see her now, but I don’t believe that’s the reason, because her niece is always ill. I believe someone has been setting her against us. Her manner was so queer—”

“Never mind, Pussy,” I said; “whatever you do, don’t cry, or I shall have to cry too, to keep you in countenance, and then you’ll never respect your man again!”

She dried her eyes obediently on my handkerchief, and even smiled faintly.

“But you see,” she went on, “it is really serious, because these village people are so sheepy, and if one won’t do a thing you may be quite sure none of the others will. And I shall have to cook the dinners, and wash up the hateful greasy plates; and you’ll have to carry cans of water about, and clean the boots and knives—and we shall never have any time for work, or earn any money, or

anything. We shall have to work all day, and only be able to rest when we are waiting for the kettle to boil!"

I represented to her that even if we had to perform these duties, the day would still present some margin for other toils and recreations. But she refused to see the matter in any but the greyest light. She was very unreasonable, my Laura, but I could not have loved her any more if she had been as reasonable as Whately.

"I'll speak to Mrs. Dorman when she comes back, and see if I can't come to terms with her," I said. "Perhaps she wants a rise in her screw. It will be all right. Let's walk up to the church."

The church was a large and lonely one, and we loved to go there, especially upon bright nights. The path skirted a wood, cut through it once, and ran along the crest of the hill through two meadows, and round the churchyard wall, over which the old yews loomed in black masses of shadow. This path, which was partly paved, was called "the bier-balk," for it had long been the way by which the corpses had been carried to burial. The churchyard was richly treed, and was shaded by great elms which stood just outside and stretched their majestic arms in benediction over the happy dead. A large, low porch let one into the building by a Norman doorway and a heavy oak door studded with iron. Inside, the arches rose into darkness, and between them the reticulated windows, which stood out white in the moonlight. In the chancel, the windows were of rich glass, which showed in faint light their noble colouring,

and made the black oak of the choir pews hardly more solid than the shadows. But on each side of the altar lay a grey marble figure of a knight in full plate armour lying upon a low slab, with hands held up in everlasting prayer, and these figures, oddly enough, were always to be seen if there was any glimmer of light in the church. Their names were lost, but the peasants told of them that they had been fierce and wicked men, marauders by land and sea, who had been the scourge of their time, and had been guilty of deeds so foul that the house they had lived in—the big house, by the way, that had stood on the site of our cottage—had been stricken by lightning and the vengeance of Heaven. But for all that, the gold of their heirs had bought them a place in the church. Looking at the bad hard faces reproduced in the marble, this story was easily believed.

The church looked at its best and weirdest on that night, for the shadows of the yew trees fell through the windows upon the floor of the nave and touched the pillars with tattered shade. We sat down together without speaking, and watched the solemn beauty of the old church, with some of that awe which inspired its early builders. We walked to the chancel and looked at the sleeping warriors. Then we rested some time on the stone seat in the porch, looking out over the stretch of quiet moonlit meadows, feeling in every fibre of our being the peace of the night and of our happy love; and came away at last with a sense that even scrubbing and blackleading were but small troubles at their worst.



Mrs. Dorman had come back from the village, and I at once invited her to a tête-à-tête.

“Now, Mrs. Dorman,” I said, when I had got her into my painting room, “what’s all this about your not staying with us?”

“I should be glad to get away, sir, before the end of the month,” she answered, with her usual placid dignity.

“Have you any fault to find, Mrs. Dorman?”

“None at all, sir; you and your lady have always been most kind, I’m sure—”

“Well, what is it? Are your wages not high enough?”

“No, sir, I gets quite enough.”

“Then why not stay?”

“I’d rather not”—with some hesitation—“my niece is ill.”

“But your niece has been ill ever since we came.”

No answer. There was a long and awkward silence. I broke it.

“Can’t you stay for another month?” I asked.

“No, sir. I’m bound to go by Thursday.”

And this was Monday!

“Well, I must say, I think you might have let us know before. There’s no time now to get any one else, and your mistress is not fit to do heavy housework. Can’t you stay till next week?”

“I might be able to come back next week.”

I was now convinced that all she wanted was a brief holiday, which we should have been willing enough to let her have, as soon as we could get a substitute.

“But why must you go this week?” I persisted. “Come, out with it.”

Mrs. Dorman drew the little shawl, which she always wore, tightly across her bosom, as though she were cold. Then she said, with a sort of effort—

“They say, sir, as this was a big house in Catholic times, and there was a many deeds done here.”

The nature of the “deeds” might be vaguely inferred from the inflection of Mrs. Dorman’s voice—which was enough to make one’s blood run cold. I was glad that Laura was not in the room. She was always nervous, as highly-strung natures are, and I felt that these tales about our house, told by this old peasant woman, with her impressive manner and contagious credulity, might have made our home less dear to my wife.

“Tell me all about it, Mrs. Dorman,” I said; “you needn’t mind about telling me. I’m not like the young people who make fun of such things.”

Which was partly true.

“Well, sir”—she sank her voice—“you may have seen in the church, beside the altar, two shapes.”

“You mean the effigies of the knights in armour,” I said cheerfully.

“I mean them two bodies, drawn out man-size in marble,” she returned, and I had to admit that her description was a thousand times more graphic than mine, to say nothing of a certain weird force and uncanniness about the phrase “drawn out man-size in marble.”

“They do say, as on All Saints’ Eve them two bodies sits up on their slabs, and gets off of them, and then walks down the aisle, in their marble”—(another good phrase, Mrs. Dorman)—“and as the church clock strikes eleven they walks out of the church door, and over the graves, and along the bier-balk, and if it’s a wet night there’s the marks of their feet in the morning.”

“And where do they go?” I asked, rather fascinated.

“They comes back here to their home, sir, and if any one meets them—-”

“Well, what then?” I asked.

But no—not another word could I get from her, save that her niece was ill and she must go. After what I had heard I scorned to discuss the niece, and tried to get from Mrs.

Dorman more details of the legend. I could get nothing but warnings.

“Whatever you do, sir, lock the door early on All Saints’ Eve, and make the cross-sign over the doorstep and on the windows.”

“But has any one ever seen these things?” I persisted.

“That’s not for me to say. I know what I know, sir.”

“Well, who was here last year?”

“No one, sir; the lady as owned the house only stayed here in summer, and she always went to London a full month afore the night. And I’m sorry to inconvenience you and your lady, but my niece is ill and I must go on Thursday.”

I could have shaken her for her absurd reiteration of that obvious fiction, after she had told me her real reasons.

She was determined to go, nor could our united entreaties move her in the least.

I did not tell Laura the legend of the shapes that “walked in their marble,” partly because a legend concerning our house might perhaps trouble my wife, and partly, I think, from some more occult reason. This was not quite the same to me as any other story, and I did not want to talk about it till the day was over. I had very soon ceased to think of the legend, however. I was painting a portrait of Laura, against the lattice window, and I could not think

of much else. I had got a splendid background of yellow and grey sunset, and was working away with enthusiasm at her lace. On Thursday Mrs. Dorman went. She relented, at parting, so far as to say—

“Don’t you put yourself about too much, ma’am, and if there’s any little thing I can do next week, I’m sure I shan’t mind.”

From which I inferred that she wished to come back to us after Hallowe’en. Up to the last she adhered to the fiction of the niece with touching fidelity.

Thursday passed off pretty well. Laura showed marked ability in the matter of steak and potatoes, and I confess that my knives, and the plates, which I insisted upon washing, were better done than I had dared to expect.

Friday came. It is about what happened on that Friday that this is written. I wonder if I should have believed it, if any one had told it to me. I will write the story of it as quickly and plainly as I can. Everything that happened on that day is burnt into my brain. I shall not forget anything, nor leave anything out.

I got up early, I remember, and lighted the kitchen fire, and had just achieved a smoky success, when my little wife came running down, as sunny and sweet as the clear October morning itself. We prepared breakfast together, and found it very good fun. The housework was soon done, and when brushes and brooms and pails were quiet again, the house was still indeed. It is wonderful what a difference one makes in a house. We really missed

Mrs. Dorman, quite apart from considerations concerning pots and pans. We spent the day in dusting our books and putting them straight, and dined gaily on cold steak and coffee. Laura was, if possible, brighter and gayer and sweeter than usual, and I began to think that a little domestic toil was really good for her. We had never been so merry since we were married, and the walk we had that afternoon was, I think, the happiest time of all my life. When we had watched the deep scarlet clouds slowly pale into leaden grey against a pale-green sky, and saw the white mists curl up along the hedgerows in the distant marsh, we came back to the house, silently, hand in hand.

“You are sad, my darling,” I said, half-jestingly, as we sat down together in our little parlour. I expected a disclaimer, for my own silence had been the silence of complete happiness. To my surprise she said—

“Yes. I think I am sad, or rather I am uneasy. I don’t think I’m very well. I have shivered three or four times since we came in, and it is not cold, is it?”

“No,” I said, and hoped it was not a chill caught from the treacherous mists that roll up from the marshes in the dying light. No—she said, she did not think so. Then, after a silence, she spoke suddenly—

“Do you ever have presentiments of evil?”

“No,” I said, smiling, “and I shouldn’t believe in them if I had.”

"I do," she went on; "the night my father died I knew it, though he was right away in the north of Scotland." I did not answer in words.

She sat looking at the fire for some time in silence, gently stroking my hand. At last she sprang up, came behind me, and, drawing my head back, kissed me.

"There, it's over now," she said. "What a baby I am! Come, light the candles, and we'll have some of these new Rubinstein duets."

And we spent a happy hour or two at the piano.

At about half-past ten I began to long for the good-night pipe, but Laura looked so white that I felt it would be brutal of me to fill our sitting-room with the fumes of strong cavendish.

"I'll take my pipe outside," I said.

"Let me come, too."

"No, sweetheart, not to-night; you're much too tired. I shan't be long. Get to bed, or I shall have an invalid to nurse to-morrow as well as the boots to clean."

I kissed her and was turning to go, when she flung her arms round my neck, and held me as if she would never let me go again. I stroked her hair.

"Come, Pussy, you're over-tired. The housework has been too much for you."

She loosened her clasp a little and drew a deep breath.

“No. We’ve been very happy to-day, Jack, haven’t we? Don’t stay out too long.”

“I won’t, my dearie.”

I strolled out of the front door, leaving it unlatched. What a night it was! The jagged masses of heavy dark cloud were rolling at intervals from horizon to horizon, and thin white wreaths covered the stars. Through all the rush of the cloud river, the moon swam, breasting the waves and disappearing again in the darkness. When now and again her light reached the woodlands they seemed to be slowly and noiselessly waving in time to the swing of the clouds above them. There was a strange grey light over all the earth; the fields had that shadowy bloom over them which only comes from the marriage of dew and moonshine, or frost and starlight.

I walked up and down, drinking in the beauty of the quiet earth and the changing sky. The night was absolutely silent. Nothing seemed to be abroad. There was no skurrying of rabbits, or twitter of the half-asleep birds. And though the clouds went sailing across the sky, the wind that drove them never came low enough to rustle the dead leaves in the woodland paths. Across the meadows I could see the church tower standing out black and grey against the sky. I walked there thinking over our three months of happiness—and of my wife, her dear eyes, her loving ways. Oh, my little girl! my own little



girl; what a vision came then of a long, glad life for you and me together!

I heard a bell-beat from the church. Eleven already! I turned to go in, but the night held me. I could not go back into our little warm rooms yet. I would go up to the church. I felt vaguely that it would be good to carry my love and thankfulness to the sanctuary whither so many loads of sorrow and gladness had been borne by the men and women of the dead years.

I looked in at the low window as I went by. Laura was half lying on her chair in front of the fire. I could not see her face, only her little head showed dark against the pale blue wall. She was quite still. Asleep, no doubt. My heart reached out to her, as I went on. There must be a God, I thought, and a God who was good. How otherwise could anything so sweet and dear as she have ever been imagined?

I walked slowly along the edge of the wood. A sound broke the stillness of the night, it was a rustling in the wood. I stopped and listened. The sound stopped too. I went on, and now distinctly heard another step than mine answer mine like an echo. It was a poacher or a wood-stealer, most likely, for these were not unknown in our Arcadian neighbourhood. But whoever it was, he was a fool not to step more lightly. I turned into the wood, and now the footstep seemed to come from the path I had just left. It must be an echo, I thought. The wood looked perfect in the moonlight. The large dying ferns and the brushwood showed where through

thinning foliage the pale light came down. The tree trunks stood up like Gothic columns all around me. They reminded me of the church, and I turned into the bier-balk, and passed through the corpse-gate between the graves to the low porch. I paused for a moment on the stone seat where Laura and I had watched the fading landscape. Then I noticed that the door of the church was open, and I blamed myself for having left it unlatched the other night. We were the only people who ever cared to come to the church except on Sundays, and I was vexed to think that through our carelessness the damp autumn airs had had a chance of getting in and injuring the old fabric. I went in. It will seem strange, perhaps, that I should have gone half-way up the aisle before I remembered—with a sudden chill, followed by as sudden a rush of self-contempt—that this was the very day and hour when, according to tradition, the “shapes drawn out man-size in marble” began to walk.

Having thus remembered the legend, and remembered it with a shiver, of which I was ashamed, I could not do otherwise than walk up towards the altar, just to look at the figures—as I said to myself; really what I wanted was to assure myself, first, that I did not believe the legend, and, secondly, that it was not true. I was rather glad that I had come. I thought now I could tell Mrs. Dorman how vain her fancies were, and how peacefully the marble figures slept on through the ghastly hour. With my hands in my pockets I passed up the aisle. In the grey dim light the eastern end of the church looked larger than usual, and the arches above the two tombs looked larger too. The moon came out and showed me the reason. I

stopped short, my heart gave a leap that nearly choked me, and then sank sickeningly.

The “bodies drawn out man-size” were gone, and their marble slabs lay wide and bare in the vague moonlight that slanted through the east window.

Were they really gone? or was I mad? Clenching my nerves, I stooped and passed my hand over the smooth slabs, and felt their flat unbroken surface. Had some one taken the things away? Was it some vile practical joke? I would make sure, anyway. In an instant I had made a torch of a newspaper, which happened to be in my pocket, and lighting it held it high above my head. Its yellow glare illumined the dark arches and those slabs. The figures were gone. And I was alone in the church; or was I alone?

And then a horror seized me, a horror indefinable and indescribable—an overwhelming certainty of supreme and accomplished calamity. I flung down the torch and tore along the aisle and out through the porch, biting my lips as I ran to keep myself from shrieking aloud. Oh, was I mad—or what was this that possessed me? I leaped the churchyard wall and took the straight cut across the fields, led by the light from our windows. Just as I got over the first stile, a dark figure seemed to spring out of the ground. Mad still with that certainty of misfortune, I made for the thing that stood in my path, shouting, “Get out of the way, can’t you!”

But my push met with a more vigorous resistance than I had expected. My arms were caught just above the elbow and held as in a vice, and the raw-boned Irish doctor actually shook me.

“Would ye?” he cried, in his own unmistakable accents—  
“would ye, then?”

“Let me go, you fool,” I gasped. “The marble figures have gone from the church; I tell you they’ve gone.”

He broke into a ringing laugh. “I’ll have to give ye a draught to-morrow, I see. Ye’ve bin smoking too much and listening to old wives’ tales.”

“I tell you, I’ve seen the bare slabs.”

“Well, come back with me. I’m going up to old Palmer’s—his daughter’s ill; we’ll look in at the church and let me see the bare slabs.”

“You go, if you like,” I said, a little less frantic for his laughter; “I’m going home to my wife.”

“Rubbish, man,” said he; “d’ye think I’ll permit of that? Are ye to go saying all yer life that ye’ve seen solid marble endowed with vitality, and me to go all me life saying ye were a coward? No, sir—ye shan’t do ut.”

The night air—a human voice—and I think also the physical contact with this six feet of solid common sense, brought me back a little to my ordinary self, and the word “coward” was a mental shower-bath.

“Come on, then,” I said sullenly; “perhaps you’re right.”

He still held my arm tightly. We got over the stile and back to the church. All was still as death. The place smelt very damp and earthy. We walked up the aisle. I am not ashamed to confess that I shut my eyes: I knew the figures would not be there. I heard Kelly strike a match.

“Here they are, ye see, right enough; ye’ve been dreaming or drinking, asking yer pardon for the imputation.”

I opened my eyes. By Kelly’s expiring vesta I saw two shapes lying “in their marble” on their slabs. I drew a deep breath, and caught his hand.

“I’m awfully indebted to you,” I said. “It must have been some trick of light, or I have been working rather hard, perhaps that’s it. Do you know, I was quite convinced they were gone.”

“I’m aware of that,” he answered rather grimly; “ye’ll have to be careful of that brain of yours, my friend, I assure ye.”

He was leaning over and looking at the right-hand figure, whose stony face was the most villainous and deadly in expression.

“By Jove,” he said, “something has been afoot here—this hand is broken.”

And so it was. I was certain that it had been perfect the last time Laura and I had been there.

“Perhaps some one has tried to remove them,” said the young doctor.

“That won’t account for my impression,” I objected.

“Too much painting and tobacco will account for that, well enough.”

“Come along,” I said, “or my wife will be getting anxious. You’ll come in and have a drop of whisky and drink confusion to ghosts and better sense to me.”

“I ought to go up to Palmer’s, but it’s so late now I’d best leave it till the morning,” he replied. “I was kept late at the Union, and I’ve had to see a lot of people since. All right, I’ll come back with ye.”

I think he fancied I needed him more than did Palmer’s girl, so, discussing how such an illusion could have been possible, and deducing from this experience large generalities concerning ghostly apparitions, we walked up to our cottage. We saw, as we walked up the garden-path, that bright light streamed out of the front door, and presently saw that the parlour door was open too. Had she gone out?

“Come in,” I said, and Dr. Kelly followed me into the parlour. It was all ablaze with candles, not only the wax ones, but at least a dozen guttering, glaring tallow dips, stuck in vases and ornaments in unlikely places. Light, I

knew, was Laura's remedy for nervousness. Poor child! Why had I left her? Brute that I was.

We glanced round the room, and at first we did not see her. The window was open, and the draught set all the candles flaring one way. Her chair was empty and her handkerchief and book lay on the floor. I turned to the window. There, in the recess of the window, I saw her. Oh, my child, my love, had she gone to that window to watch for me? And what had come into the room behind her? To what had she turned with that look of frantic fear and horror? Oh, my little one, had she thought that it was I whose step she heard, and turned to meet—what?

She had fallen back across a table in the window, and her body lay half on it and half on the window-seat, and her head hung down over the table, the brown hair loosened and fallen to the carpet. Her lips were drawn back, and her eyes wide, wide open. They saw nothing now. What had they seen last?

The doctor moved towards her, but I pushed him aside and sprang to her; caught her in my arms and cried—

“It's all right, Laura! I've got you safe, wifie.”

She fell into my arms in a heap. I clasped her and kissed her, and called her by all her pet names, but I think I knew all the time that she was dead. Her hands were tightly clenched. In one of them she held something fast. When I was quite sure that she was dead, and that nothing mattered at all any more, I let her open her hand to see what she held.

Man-Size in Marble

It was a grey marble finger.

THE END



## The Ebony Frame

### The Ebony Frame

To be rich is a luxurious sensation, the more so when you have plumbed the depths of hard-up-ness as a Fleet Street hack, a picker-up of unconsidered pars, a reporter, an unappreciated journalist; all callings utterly inconsistent with one's family feeling and one's direct descent from the Dukes of Picardy.

When my Aunt Dorcas died and left me seven hundred a year and a furnished house in Chelsea, I felt that life had nothing left to offer except immediate possession of the legacy. Even Mildred Mayhew, whom I had hitherto regarded as my life's light, became less luminous. I was not engaged to Mildred, but I lodged with her mother, and I sang duets with Mildred and gave her gloves when it would run to it, which was seldom. She was a dear, good girl, and I meant to marry her some day. It is very nice to feel that a good little woman is thinking of you? it helps you in your work? and it is pleasant to know she will say "Yes," when you say, "Will you?"

But my legacy almost put Mildred out of my head, especially as she was staying with friends in the country.

Before the gloss was off my new mourning, I was seated in my aunt's armchair in front of the fire in the drawing-room of my own house. My own house! It was grand, but rather lonely. I did think of Mildred just then.

## The Ebony Frame

The room was comfortably furnished with rosewood and damask. On the walls hung a few fairly good oil paintings, but the space above the mantelpiece was disfigured by an exceedingly bad print, "The Trial of Lord William Russell," framed in a dark frame. I got up to look at it. I had visited my aunt with dutiful regularity, but I never remembered seeing this frame before. It was not intended for a print, but for an oil-painting. It was of fine ebony, beautifully and curiously carved. I looked at it with growing interest, and when my aunt's housemaid? I had retained her modest staff of servants? came in with the lamp, I asked her how long the print had been there.

"Mistress only bought it two days before she was took ill," she said; "but the frame? she didn't want to buy a new one? so she got this out of the attic. There's lots of curious old things there, sir."

"Had my aunt had this frame long?"

"Oh, yes, sir. It must have come long before I did, and I've been here seven years come Christmas. There was a picture in it. That's upstairs too? but it's that black and ugly it might as well be a chimney-back."

I felt a desire to see this picture. What if it were some priceless old master, in which my aunt's eyes had only seen rubbish?

Directly after breakfast next morning, I paid a visit to the attic.

It was crammed with old furniture enough to stock a curiosity shop. All the house was furnished solidly in the Mid-Victorian style, and in this room everything not in keeping with the drawing-room suite ideal was stowed away. Tables of papier-mache and mother-of-pearl, straight-backed chairs with twisted feet and faded needle-work cushions, fire-screens of gilded carving and beaded banners, oak bureaux with brass handles, a little worktable with its faded, moth-eaten, silk flutings hanging in disconsolate shreds; on these, and the dust that covered them, blazed the full daylight as I pulled up the blinds. I promised myself a good time in re-enshrining these household gods in my parlour, and promoting the Victorian suite to the attic. But at present my business was to find the picture as "black as the chimney back"; and presently, behind a heap of fenders and boxes, I found it.

Jane, the housemaid, identified it at once. I took it downstairs carefully, and examined it. Neither subject nor colour was distinguishable. There was a splodge of a darker tint in the middle, but whether it was figure, or tree, or house, no man could have told. It seemed to be painted on a very thick panel bound with leather. I decided to send it to one of those persons who pour on rotting family portraits the water of eternal youth; but even as I did so, I thought, why not try my own restorative hand at a corner of it.

My bath-sponge soap and nail-brush, vigorously applied for a few seconds, showed me that there was no picture to clean. Bare oak presented itself to my persevering

brush. I tried the other side, Jane watching me with indulgent interest. The same result. Then the truth dawned on me. Why was the panel so thick? I tore off the leather binding, and the panel divided and fell to the ground in a cloud of dust. There were two pictures, they had been nailed face to face. I leaned them against the wall, and the next moment I was leaning against it myself.

For one of the pictures was myself, a perfect portrait, no shade of expression or turn of feature wanting. Myself, in the dress men wore when James the First was King. When had this been done? And how, without my knowledge? Was this some whim of my aunt's?

"Lor', sir!" the shrill surprise of Jane at my elbow; "what a lovely photo it is! Was it a fancy ball, sir?"

"Yes," I stammered. "I? I don't think I want anything more now. You can go."

She went; and I turned, still with my heart beating violently, to the other picture. This was a beautiful woman's picture, very beautiful she was. I noted all her beauties, straight nose, low brows, full lips, thin hands, large, deep, luminous eyes. She wore a black velvet gown. It was a three-quarter-length portrait. Her arms rested on a table beside her, and her head on her hands; but her face was turned full forward, and her eyes met those of the spectator bewilderingly. On the table by her were compasses and shining instruments whose uses I did not know, books, a goblet, and a heap of papers and

pens. I saw all this afterwards. I believe it was a quarter of an hour before I could turn my eyes from her. I have never see any other eyes like hers; they appealed, as a child's or a dog's do; they commanded, as might those of an empress.

"Shall I sweep up the dust sir?" Curiosity had brought Jane back. I acceded. I turned from her my portrait. I kept between her and the woman in the black velvet. When I was alone again I tore down "The Trial of Lord William Russell," and I put the picture of the woman in its strong ebony frame.

Then I wrote to a frame-maker for a frame for my portrait. It had so long lived face to face with this beautiful witch that I had not the heart to banish it from her presence; I suppose I am sentimental, if it be sentimental to think such things as that.

The new frame came home, and I hung it opposite the fireplace. An exhaustive search among my aunt's papers showed no explanation of the portrait of myself, no history of the portrait of the woman with the wonderful eyes. I only learned that all the old furniture together had come to my aunt at the death of my great-uncle, the head of the family; and I should have concluded that the resemblance was only a family one, if everyone who came in had not exclaimed at the "speaking likeness." I adopted Jane's "fancy ball" explanation.

And there, one might suppose, the matter of the portraits ended. One might suppose it, that is, if there were not

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evidently a good deal more written here about it. However, to me then the matter seemed ended.

I went to see Mildred; I invited her and her mother to come and stay with me; I rather avoided glancing at the picture in ebony frame. I could not forget, nor remember without singular emotion, the look in the eyes of that woman when mine first met them. I shrank from meeting that look again.

I reorganised the house somewhat, preparing for Mildred's visit. I brought down much of the old-fashioned furniture, and after a long day of arranging and re-arranging, I sat down before the fire, and lying back in a pleasant languor, I idly raised my eyes to the picture of the woman. I met her dark, deep, hazel eyes, and once more my gaze was held fixed as by strong magic, the kind of fascination that keeps one sometimes staring for whole minutes into one's own eyes in the glass. I gazed into her eyes, and felt my own dilate, pricked with a smart like the smart of tears.

"I wish," I said, "oh, how I wish you were a woman and not a picture! Come down! Ah, come down!"

I laughed at myself as I spoke; but even as I laughed, I held out my arms.

I was not sleepy; I was not drunk. I was as wide awake and as sober as ever was a man in the world. And yet, as I held out my arms, I saw the eyes of the picture dilate, her lips tremble? If I were to be hanged for saying it, it is true.

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Her hands moved slightly; and a sort of flicker of a smile passed over her face.

I sprang to my feet. "This won't do," I said aloud. "Firelight does play strange tricks. I'll have the lamp."

I made for the bell. My hand was on it, when I heard a sound behind me, and turned, the bell still unring. The fire had burned low and the corners of the room were deeply shadowed; but surely, there, behind the tall worked chair, was something darker than a shadow.

"I must face this out," I said, "or I shall never be able to face myself again." I left the bell, I seized the poker, and battered the dull coals to a blaze. Then I stepped back resolutely, and looked at the picture. The ebony frame was empty! From the shadow of the worked chair came a soft rustle, and out of the shadow the woman of the picture was coming, coming towards me.

I hope I shall never again know a moment of terror as blank and absolute. I could not have moved or spoken to save my life. Either all the known laws of nature were nothing, or I was mad. I stood trembling, but, I am thankful to remember, I stood still, while the black velvet gown swept across the hearthrug towards me.

Next moment a hand touched me, a hand, soft, warm, and human, and a low voice said, "You called me. I am here."

At that touch and that voice, the world seemed to give a sort of bewildering half-turn. I hardly know how to

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express it, but at once it seemed not awful, not even unusual, for portraits to become flesh, only most natural, most right, most unspeakably fortunate.

I laid my hand on hers. I looked from her to my portrait. I could not see it in the firelight. "We are not strangers," I said.

"Oh, no, not strangers." Those luminous eyes were looking up into mine, those red lips were near me. With a passionate cry, a sense of having recovered life's one great good, that had seemed wholly lost, I clasped her in my arms. She was no ghost, she was a woman, the only woman in the world.

"How long," I said, "how long is it since I lost you?"

She leaned back, hanging her full weight on the hands that were clasped behind my head. "How can I tell how long? There is no time in hell," she answered.

It was not a dream. Ah! no? there are no such dreams. I wish to God there could be. When in dreams do I see her eyes, hear her voice, feel her lips against my cheek, hold her hands to my lips, as I did that night, the supreme night of my life! At first we hardly spoke. It seemed enough:

after long grief and pain.

To feel the arms of my true love.

Round me once again.



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It is very difficult to tell my story. There are no words to express the sense of glad reunion, the complete realisation of every hope and dream of a life, that came upon me as I sat with my hand in hers, and looked into her eyes.

How could it have been a dream, when I left her sitting in the straight-backed chair, and went down to the kitchen to tell the maids I should want nothing more, that I was busy, and did not wish to be disturbed; when I fetched wood for the fire with my own hands, and, bringing it in, found her still sitting there, saw the little brown head turn as I entered, saw the love in her dear eyes; when I threw myself at her feet and blessed the day I was born, since life had given me this.

Not a thought of Mildred; all other things in my life were a dream, this, its one splendid reality.

"I am wondering," she said, after a while, when we had made such cheer, each of the other, as true lovers may after long parting, "I am wondering how much you remember of our past?"

"I remember nothing but that I love you, that I have loved you all my life."

"You remember nothing? Really nothing?"

"Only that I am truly yours; that we have both suffered; that, tell me, my mistress dear, all that you remember. Explain it all to me. Make me understand. And yet? No, I

don't want to understand. It is enough that we are together."

If it was a dream, why have I never dreamed it again?

She leaned down towards me, her arm lay on my neck, and drew my head till it rested on her shoulder. "I am a ghost, I suppose," she said, laughing softly; and her laughter stirred memories which I just grasped at and just missed. "But you and I know better, don't we? I will tell you everything you have forgotten. We loved each other, ah! no, you have not forgotten that, and when you came back from the wars, we were to be married. Our pictures were painted before you went away. You know I was more learned than women of that day. Dear one, when you were gone, they said I was a witch. They tried me. They said I should be burned. Just because I had looked at the stars and gained more knowledge than other women, they must needs bind me to a stake and let me be eaten by the fire. And you far away!"

Her whole body trembled and shrank. Oh love, what dream would have told me that my kisses would soothe even that memory?

"The night before," she went on, "the devil did come to me. I was innocent before, you know it, don't you? And even then my sin was for you! for you! because of the exceeding love I bore you! The devil came, and I sold my soul to eternal flame. But I got a good price. I got the right to come back through my picture (if anyone, looking at it, wished for me), as long as my picture

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stayed in its ebony frame. That frame was not carved by man's hand. I got the right to come back to you, oh, my heart's heart. And another thing I won, which you shall hear anon. They burned me for a witch, they made me suffer hell on earth. Those faces, all crowding round, the crackling wood and the choking smell of the smoke!"

"Oh, love, no more, no more!"

"When my mother sat that night before my picture, she wept and cried, 'Come back, my poor, lost child!' And I went to her with glad leaps of heart. Dear, she shrank from me, she fled, she shrieked and moaned of ghosts. She had our pictures covered from sight, and put again in the ebony frame. She had promised me my picture should stay always there. Ah, through all these years your face was against mine."

She paused.

"But the man you loved?"

"You came home. My picture was gone. They lied to you, and you married another woman; but some day I knew you would walk the world again, and that I should find you."

"The other gain?" I asked.

"The other gain," she said slowly, "I gave my soul for. It is this. If you also will give up your hopes of heaven, I can remain a woman, I can remain in your world! I can

be your wife. Oh my dear, after all these years, at last! at last!"

"If I sacrifice my soul," I said slowly, and the words did not seem an imbecility, "if I sacrifice my soul I win you? Why, love, it's a contradiction in terms. You are my soul."

Her eyes looked straight into mine. Whatever might happen, whatever did happen, whatever may happen, our two souls in that moment met and became one.

"Then you choose, you deliberately choose, to give up your hopes of heaven for me, as I gave up mine for you?"

"I will not," I said, "give up my hope of heaven on any terms. Tell me what I must do that you and I may make our heaven here, as now?"

"I will tell you to-morrow," she said. "Be alone here to-morrow night, twelve is ghost's time, isn't it? And then I will come out of the picture, and never go back to it. I shall live with you, and die, and be buried, and there will be an end of me. But we shall live first, my heart's heart."

I laid my head on her knee. A strange drowsiness overcame me. Holding her hand against my cheek, I lost consciousness. When I awoke, the grey November dawn was glimmering, ghost like, through the uncurtained window. My head was pillowed on my arm, and rested. I raised my head quickly, ah! not on my lady's knee, but on the needle-worked cushion of the straight-backed chair. I sprang to my feet. I was stiff with cold and dazed

with dreams, but I turned my eyes on the picture.. There she sat, my lady, my dear love. I held out my arms, but the passionate cry I would have uttered died on my lips. She had said twelve o'clock. Her lightest word was my law. So I only stood in front of the picture, and gazed into those grey-green eyes till tears of passionate happiness filled my own.

“Oh! my dear, my dear, how shall I pass the hours till I hold you again?”

No thought, then, of my whole life's completion and consummation being a dream.

I staggered up to my room, fell across my bed, and slept heavily and dreamlessly. When I awoke it was high noon. Mildred and her mother were coming to lunch.

I remembered, at one o'clock, Mildred coming and her existence.

Now indeed the dream began.

With a penetrating sense of the futility of any action apart from her, I gave the necessary orders for the reception of my guests. When Mildred and her mother came I received them with cordiality; but my genial phrases all seemed to be someone else's. My voice sounded like an echo; my heart was not there.

Still, the situation was not intolerable, until the hour when afternoon tea was served in the drawing-room. Mildred and mother kept the conversational pot boiling

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with a profusion of genteel commonplaces, and I bore it, as one in sight of heaven can bear mild purgatory. I looked up at my sweetheart in the ebony frame, and I felt that anything which might happen, any irresponsible imbecility, any bathos of boredom, was nothing, if, after all, she came to me again.

And yet, when Mildred, too, looked at the portrait and said: "Doesn't she think a lot of herself? Theatrical character, I suppose? One of your flames, Mr. Devigne?" I had a sickening sense of impotent irritation which became absolute torture when Mildred, (how could I ever have admired that chocolate-box barmaid style of prettiness) threw herself into the high-backed chair, covering the needlework with ridiculous flounces, and added, "Silence gives consent! Who is it, Mr. Devigne? Tell us all about her: I am sure she has a story."

Poor little Mildred, sitting there smiling, serene in her confidence that her every word charmed me, sitting there with her rather pinched waist, her rather tight boots, her rather vulgar voice, sitting in the chair where my dear lady had sat when she told me her story! I could not bear it.

"Don't sit there," I said, "it's not comfortable!"

But the girl would not be warned. With a laugh that set every nerve in my body vibrating with annoyance, she said, "Oh, dear! mustn't I even sit in the same chair as your black-velvet woman?"

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I looked at the chair in the picture. It was the same, and in her chair Mildred was sitting. Then a horrible sense of the reality of Mildred came upon me, Was all this a reality after all? But for fortunate chance, might Mildred have occupied, not only her chair, but her place in my life? I rose.

“I hope you won’t think me very rude,” I said, “but I am obliged to go out.”

I forget what appointment I alleged. The lie came readily enough.

I faced Mildred’s pouts with the hope that she and her mother would not wait dinner for me. I fled. In another minute I was safe, alone, under the chill, cloudy, autumn sky-free to think, think, think of my dear lady.

I walked for hours along streets and squares; I lived over and over again every look, word and hand-touch, every kiss; I was completely, unspeakably happy.

Mildred was utterly forgotten; my lady of the ebony frame filled my heart, and soul, and spirit.

As I heard eleven boom through the fog, I turned and went home.

When I got to my street, I found a crowd surging through it, a strong red, light filling the air.

A house was on fire. Mine!

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I elbowed my way through the crowd.

The picture of my lady, that, at least, I could save.

As I sprang up the steps, I saw, as in a dream, yes, all this was really dream-like, I saw Mildred leaning out of the first-floor window, wringing her hands.

“Come back, sir,” cried a fireman; “we’ll get the young lady out right enough.”

But my lady? The stairs were crackling, smoking, and as hot as hell. I went up to the room where her picture was. Strange to say, I only felt that the picture was a thing we should like to look on through the long, glad, wedded life that was to be ours. I never thought of it as being one with her.

As I reached the first floor I felt arms about my neck. The smoke was too thick for me to distinguish features.

“Save me,” a voice whispered. I clasped a figure in my arms and bore it with a strange disease, down the shaking stairs and out into safety. It was Mildred. I knew that directly I clasped her.

“Stand back,” cried the crowd.

“Everyone’s safe,” cried a fireman.

The flames leaped from every window The sky grew redder and redder. I sprang from the hands that would have held me. I leaped up the steps. I crawled up the



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stairs. Suddenly the whole horror came to me. "As long as my picture remains in the ebony frame." What if picture and frame perished together?

I fought with the fire and with my own choking inability to fight with it. I pushed on. I must save my picture. I reached the drawing room.

As I sprang in, I saw my lady, I swear it, through the smoke and the flames, hold out her arms to me, to me, who came too late to save her, and to save my own life's joy. I never saw her again.

Before I could reach her, or cry out to her, I felt the floor yield beneath my feet, and I fell into the flames below.

How did they save me? What does that matter? They saved me somehow, curse them. Every stick of my aunt's furniture was destroyed. My friends pointed out that, as the furniture was heavily insured, the carelessness of a nightly-studious housemaid had done me no harm.

No harm!

That was how I won and lost my only love.

I deny, with all my soul in the denial, that it was a dream. There are no such dreams. Dreams of longing and pain there are in plenty; but dreams of complete, of unspeakable happiness? ah, no? it is the rest of life that is the dream.

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But, if I think that, why have I married Mildred and grown stout, and dull, and prosperous?

I tell you, it is all this that is the dream; my dear lady only is the reality. And what does it matter what one does in a dream?

THE END