

Paul the Minstrel

By A. C. Benson

I

The old House of Heritage stood just below the downs, in the few meadows that were all that was left of a great estate. The house itself was of stone, very firmly and gravely built; and roofed with thin slabs of stone, small at the roof-ridge, and increasing in size towards the eaves. Inside, there were a few low panelled rooms opening on a large central hall; there was little furniture, and that of a sturdy and solid kind—but the house needed nothing else, and had all the beauty that came of a simple austerity.

Old Mistress Alison, who abode there, was aged and poor. She had but one house-servant, a serious and honest maid, whose only pride was to keep the place sweet, and save her mistress from all care. But Mistress Alison was not to be dismayed by poverty; she was a tranquil and loving woman, who had never married; but who, as if to compensate her for the absence of nearer ties, had a simple and wholesome love of all created things. She was infirm now, but was quite content, when it was fine, to sit for long hours idle for very love, and look about her with a peaceful and smiling air; she prayed much, or rather held a sweet converse in her heart with God; she thought little of her latter end, which she knew could not be long delayed, but was content to leave it in the hands of the Father, sure that He, who had made the world so beautiful and so full of love, would comfort her when she came to enter in at the dark gate.

There was also an old and silent man who looked after the cattle and the few hens that the household kept; at the back of the house was a thatched timbered grange, where he laid his tools; but he spent his time mostly in the garden, which sloped down to the fishpond, and was all bordered with box; here was a pleasant homely scent, on hot days, of the good herbs that shed their rich smell in the sun; and here the flies, that sate in the leaves, would buzz at the sound of a footfall, and then be still again, cleaning their hands together in their busy manner.

The only other member of the quiet household was the boy Paul, who was distantly akin to Mistress Alison. He had neither father nor mother, and had lived at Heritage all of his life that he could remember; he was a slender, serious boy, with delicate features, and large grey eyes that looked as if they held a secret; but if they had, it was a secret of his forefathers; for the boy had led a most quiet and innocent life; he had been taught to read in a fashion, but he had no schooling; sometimes a neighbouring goodwife would say to Mistress Alison that the boy should be sent to school, and Mistress Alison would open her peaceful eyes and say, "Nay, Paul is not like other boys—he would get all the hurt and none of the good of school; when there is work for him he will do it—but I am not for making all toil alike. Paul shall grow up like the lilies of the field. God made not all things to be busy." And the goodwife would shake her head and wonder; for it was not easy to answer Mistress Alison, who indeed was often right in the end.

So Paul grew up as he would; sometimes he would help the old gardener, when there was work to be done; for he loved to serve others, and was content with toil if it was sweetened with love but often he rambled by himself for hours together; he cared little for company, because the earth was to him full of wonder and of sweet sights and sounds. He loved to climb the down, and lie feasting his eyes on the rich plain, spread out like a map; the farms in their closes, the villages from which went up the smoke at evening, the distant blue hills, like the hills of heaven, the winding river, and the lake that lay in the winter twilight like a shield of silver. He loved to see

the sun flash on the windows of the houses so distant that they could not themselves be seen, but only sparkled like stars. He loved to loiter on the edge of the steep hanging woods in summer, to listen to the humming of the flies deep in the brake, and to catch a sight of lonely flowers; he loved the scent of the wind blowing softly out of the copse, and he wondered what the trees said to each other, when they stood still and happy in the heat of midday. He loved, too, the silent night, full of stars, when the wood that topped the bill lay black against the sky. The whole world seemed to him to be full of a mysterious and beautiful life of which he could never quite catch the secret; these innocent flowers, these dreaming trees seemed, as it were, to hold him smiling at arm's length, while they guarded their joy from him. The birds and the beasts seemed to him to have less of this quiet joy, for they were fearful and careful, working hard to find a living, and dreading the sight of man; but sometimes in the fragrant eventide the nightingale would say a little of what was in her heart. "Yes," Paul would say to himself, "it is like that."

One other chief delight the boy had; he knew the magic of sound, which spoke to his heart in a way that it speaks to but few; the sounds of the earth gave up their sweets to him; the musical fluting of owls, the liquid notes of the cuckoo, the thin pipe of dancing flies, the mournful creaking of the cider-press, the horn of the oxherd wound far off on the hill, the tinkling of sheep-bells—of all these he knew the notes; and not only these, but the rhythmical swing of the scythes sweeping through the grass, the flails heard through the hot air from the barn, the clinking of the anvil in the village forge, the bubble of the stream through the weir—all these had a tale to tell him. Sometimes, for days together, he would hum to himself a few notes that pleased him by their sweet cadence, and he would string together some simple words to them, and sing them to himself with gentle content. The song of the reapers on the upland, or the rude chanting in the little church had a magical charm for him; and Mistress Alison would hear the boy, in his room overhead, singing softly to himself for very gladness of heart, like a little bird of the dawn, or tapping out some tripping beat of time; when she would wonder and speak to God of what was in her heart.

As Paul grew older—he was now about sixteen—a change came slowly over his mind; he began to have moods of a silent discontent, a longing for something far away, a desire of he knew not what. His old dreams began to fade, though they visited him from time to time; but he began to care less for the silent beautiful life of the earth, and to take more thought of men. He had never felt much about himself before; but one day, lying beside a woodland pool at the feet of the down, he caught a sight of his own face; and when he smiled at it, it seemed to smile back at him; he began to wonder what the world was like, and what all the busy people that lived therein said and thought; he began to wish to have a friend, that he might tell him what was in his heart—and yet he knew not what it was that he would say. He began, too, to wonder how people regarded him—the people who had before been but to him a distant part of the shows of the world. Once he came in upon Mistress Alison, who sate talking with a gossip of hers; when he entered, there was a sudden silence, and a glance passed between the two; and Paul divined that they had been speaking of himself, and desired to know what they had said.

One day the old gardener, in a more talkative mood than was his wont, told him a tale of one who had visited the Wishing Well that lay a few miles away, and, praying for riches, had found the next day, in digging, an old urn of pottery, full of ancient coins. Paul was very urgent to know about the well, and the old man told him that it must be visited at noonday and alone. That he that would have his wish must throw a gift into the water, and drink of the well, and then, turning to the sun, must wish his wish aloud. Paul asked him many more questions, but the old man would say no more. So Paul determined that he would visit the place for himself.

The next day he set off. He took with him one of his few possessions, a little silver coin that a parson hard by had given him. He went his way quickly among the pleasant fields, making towards the great bulk of Blackdown beacon, where the hills swelled up into a steep bluff, with a white road, cut in the chalk, winding steeply up their green smooth sides. It was a fresh morning with a few white clouds racing merrily overhead, the shadows of which fell every now and then upon the down and ran swiftly over it, like a flood of shade leaping down the sides. There were few people to be seen anywhere; the fields were full of grass, with large daisies and high red sorrel. By midday he was beneath the front of Blackdown, and here he asked at a cottage of a good-natured woman, that was bustling in and out, the way to the well. She answered him very kindly and described the path—it was not many yards away—and then asked where he came from, saying briskly, “And what would you wish for? I should have thought you had all you could desire.” “Why, I hardly know,” said Paul, smiling. “It seems that I desire a thousand things, and can scarcely give a name to one.” “That is ever the way,” said the woman, “but the day will come when you will be content with one.” Paul did not understand what she meant, but thanked her and went on his way; and wondered that she stood so long looking after him.

At last he came to the spring. It was a pool in a field, ringed round by alders. Paul thought he had never seen a fairer place. There grew a number of great kingcups round the brim, with their flowers like glistening gold, and with cool thick stalks and fresh leaves. Inside the ring of flowers the pool looked strangely deep and black; but looking into it you could see the sand leaping at the bottom in three or four cones; and to the left the water bubbled away in a channel covered with water-plants. Paul could see that there was an abundance of little things at the bottom, half covered with sand—coins, flowers, even little jars—which he knew to be the gifts of wishers. So he flung his own coin in the pool, and saw it slide hither and thither, glancing in the light, till it settled at the dark bottom. Then he dipped and drank, turned to the sun, and closing his eyes, said out loud, “Give me what I desire.” And this he repeated three times, to be sure that he was heard. Then he opened his eyes again, and for a moment the place looked different, with a strange grey light. But there was no answer to his prayer in heaven or earth, and the very sky seemed to wear a quiet smile.

Paul waited a little, half expecting some answer; but presently he turned his back upon the pool and walked slowly away; the down lay on one side of him, looking solemn and dark over the trees which grew very plentifully; Paul thought that he would like to walk upon the down; so he went up a little leafy lane that seemed to lead to it. Suddenly, as he passed a small thicket, a voice hailed him; it was a rich and cheerful voice, and it came from under the trees. He turned in the direction of the voice, which seemed to be but a few yards off, and saw, sitting on a green bank under the shade, two figures. One was a man of middle age, dressed lightly as though for travelling, and Paul thought somewhat fantastically. His hat had a flower stuck in the band. But Paul thought little of the dress, because the face of the man attracted him; he was sunburnt and strong-looking, and Paul at first thought he must be a soldier; he had a short beard, and his hair was grown rather long; his face was deeply lined, but there was something wonderfully good-natured, friendly, and kind about his whole expression. He was smiling, and his smile showed small white teeth; and Paul felt in a moment that he could trust him, and that the man was friendly disposed to himself and all the world; friendly, not in a servile way, as one who wished to please, but in a sort of prodigal, royal way, as one who had great gifts to bestow, and was liberal of them, and looked to be made welcome. The other figure was that of a boy rather older than himself, with a merry ugly face, who in looking at Paul, seemed yet to keep a sidelong and

deferential glance at the older man, as though admiring him, and desiring to do as he did in all things.

“Where go you, pretty boy, alone in the noon-tide?” said the man.

Paul stopped and listened, and for a moment could not answer. Then he said, “I am going to the down, sir, and I have been”—he hesitated for a moment—“I have been to the Wishing Well.”

“The Wishing Well?” said the man gravely. “I did not know there was one hereabouts. I thought that every one in this happy valley had been too well content—and what did you wish for, if I may ask?”

Paul was silent and grew red; and then he said, “Oh, just for my heart’s desire.”

“That is either a very cautious or a very beautiful answer,” said the man, “and it gives me a lesson in manners; but will you not sit a little with us in the shade?—and you shall hear a concert of music such as I dare say you shall hardly hear out of France or Italy. Do you practise music, child, the divine gift?”

“I love it a little,” said Paul, “but I have no skill.”

“Yet you look to me like one who might have skill,” said the man; “you have the air of it—you look as though you listened, and as though you dreamed pleasant dreams. But, Jack,” he said, turning to his boy, “what shall we give our friend?—shall he have the ‘Song of the Rose’ first?”

The boy at this word drew a little metal pipe out of his doublet, and put it to his lips; and the man reached out his hand and took up a small lute which lay on the bank beside him. He held up a warning finger to the boy. “Remember,” he said, “that you come in at the fifth chord, together with the voice—not before.” He struck four simple chords on the lute, very gently, and with a sort of dainty preciseness; and then at the same moment the little pipe and his own voice began; the pipe played a simple descant in quicker time, with two notes to each note of the song, and the man in a brisk and simple way, as it were at the edge of his lips, sang a very sweet little country song, in a quiet homely measure.

There seemed to Paul to be nothing short of magic about it. There was a beautiful restraint about the voice, which gave him a sense both of power and feeling held back; but it brought before him a sudden picture of a garden, and the sweet life of the flowers and little trees, taking what came, sunshine and rain, and just living and smiling, breathing fragrant breath from morning to night, and sleeping a light sleep till they should waken to another tranquil day. He listened as if spellbound. There were but three verses, and though he could not remember the words, it seemed as though the rose spoke and told her dreams.

He could have listened for ever; but the voice made a sudden stop, not prolonging the last note, but keeping very closely to the time; the pipe played a little run, like an echo of the song, the man struck a brisk chord on the lute—and all was over. “Bravely played, Jack!” said the singer; “no musician could have played it better. You remembered what I told you, to keep each note separate, and have no gliding. This song must trip from beginning to end, like a brisk bird that hops on the grass.” Then he turned to Paul and, with a smile, said, “Reverend sir, how does my song please you?”

“I never heard anything more beautiful,” said Paul simply. “I cannot say it, but it was like a door opened;” and he looked at the minstrel with intent eyes;—“may I hear it again?” “Boy,” said the singer gravely, “I had rather have such a look as you gave me during the song than a golden crown. You will not understand what I say, but you paid me the homage of the pure heart, the best reward that the minstrel desires.”

Then he conferred with the other boy in a low tone, and struck a very sad yet strong chord upon his lute; and then, with a grave face, he sang what to Paul seemed like a dirge for a dead hero who had done with mortal things, and whose death seemed more a triumph than a sorrow. When he had sung the first verse, the pipe came softly and sadly in, like the voice of grief that could not be controlled, the weeping of those on whom lay the shadow of loss. To Paul, in a dim way—for he was but a child—the song seemed the voice of the world, lamenting its noblest, yet triumphing in their greatness, and desirous to follow in their steps. It brought before him all the natural sorrows of death, the call to quit the sweet and pleasant things of the world—a call that could not be denied, and that was in itself indeed stronger and even sweeter than the delights which it bade its listeners leave. And Paul seemed to walk in some stately procession of men far off and ancient, who followed a great king to the grave, and whose hearts were too full of wonder to think yet what they had lost. It was an uplifting sadness; and when the sterner strain came to an end, Paul said very quietly, putting into words the thoughts of his full heart, “I did not think that death could be so beautiful.” And the minstrel smiled, but Paul saw that his eyes were full of tears.

Then all at once the minstrel struck the lute swiftly and largely, and sang a song of those that march to victory, not elated nor excited, but strong to dare and to do; and Paul felt his heart beat within him, and he longed to be of the company. After he had sung this to an end, there was a silence, and the minstrel said to Paul, yet as though half speaking to himself, “There, my son, I have given you a specimen of my art; and I think from your look that you might be of the number of those that make these rich jewels that men call songs; and should you try to do so, be mindful of these two things: let them be perfect first. You will make many that are not perfect. In some the soul will be wanting; in others the body, in a manner of speaking, will be amiss; for they are living things, these songs, and he that makes them is a kind of god. Well, if you cannot mend one, throw it aside and think no more of it. Do not save it because it has some gracious touch, for in this are the masters of the craft different from the mere makers of songs. The master will have nothing but what is perfect within and without, while the lesser craftsman will save a poor song for the sake of a fine line or phrase.

“And next, you must do it for the love of your art, and not for the praise it wins you. That is a poisoned wine, of which if you drink, you will never know the pure and high tranquillity of spirit that befits a master. The master may be discouraged and troubled oft, but he must have in his soul a blessed peace, and know the worth and beauty of what he does; for there is nothing nobler than to make beautiful things, and to enlighten the generous heart. Fighting is a fair trade, and though it is noble in much, yet its end is to destroy; but the master of song mars nought, but makes joy;—and that is the end of my sermon for the time. And now,” he added briskly, “I must be going, for I have far to fare; but I shall pass by this way again, and shall inquire of your welfare; tell me your name and where you live.” So Paul told him, and then added timidly enough that he would fain know how to begin to practise his art. “Silence!” said the minstrel, rather fiercely; “that is an evil and timorous thought. If you are worthy, you will find the way.” And so in the hot afternoon he said farewell, and walked lightly off. And Paul stood in wonder and hope, and saw the two figures leave the flat, take to the down, and wind up the steep road, ever growing smaller, till they topped the ridge, where they seemed to stand a moment Larger than human; and presently they were lost from view.

So Paul made his way home; and when he pushed the gate of Heritage open, he wondered to think that he could recollect nothing of the road he had traversed. He went up to the house and entered the hail, There sate Mistress Alison, reading in a little book. She closed it as he came in,

and looked at him with a smile. Paul went up to her and said, "Mother" (so he was used to call her), "I have heard songs to-day such as I never dreamt of, and I pray you to let me learn the art of making music; I must be a minstrel." "'Must' is a grave word, dear heart," said Mistress Alison, looking somewhat serious; "but let me hear your story first." So Paul told of his meeting with the minstrel. Mistress Alison sat musing a long time, smiling when she met Paul's eye, till he said at last, "Will you not speak, mother?" "I know," she said at last, "whom you have met, dear child—that is Mark, the great minstrel. He travels about the land, for he is a restless man, though the king himself would have him dwell in his court, and make music for him. Yet I have looked for this day, though it has come when I did not expect it. And now I must tell you a story, Paul, in my turn. Many years ago there was a boy like you, and he loved music too and the making of songs, and he grew to great skill therein. But it was at last his ruin, for he got to love riotous company and feasting too well; and so his skill forsook him, as it does those that live not cleanly and nobly. And he married a young wife, having won her by his songs, and a child was born to them. But the minstrel fell sick and presently died, and his last prayer was that his son might not know the temptation of song. And his wife lingered a little, but she soon pined away, for her heart was broken within her; and she too died. And now, Paul, listen, for the truth must be told—you are that child, the son of sorrow and tears. And here you have lived with me all your life; but because the tale was a sad one, I have forborne to tell it you. I have waited and wondered to see whether the gift of the father is given to the son; and sometimes I have thought it might be yours, and sometimes I have doubted. And now, child, we will talk of this no more to-day, for it is ill to decide in haste. Think well over what I have said, and see if it makes a difference in your wishes. I have told you all the tale."

Now the story that Mistress Alison had told him dwelt very much in Paul's mind that night; but it seemed to him strange and far off, and he did not doubt what the end should be. It was as though the sight of the minstrel, his songs and words, had opened a window in his mind, and that he saw out of it a strange and enchanted country, of woods and streams, with a light of evening over it, bounded by far-off hills, all blue and faint, among which some beautiful thing was hidden for him to find; it seemed to call him softly to come; the trees smiled upon him, the voice of the streams bade him make haste—it all waited for him, like a country waiting for its lord to come and take possession.

Then it seemed to him that his soul slipped like a bird from the window, and rising in the air over that magical land, beat its wings softly in the pale heaven; and then like a dove that knows, by some inborn mysterious art, which way its path lies, his spirit paused upon the breeze, and then sailed out across the tree-tops. Whither? Paul knew not. And so at last he slipped into a quiet sleep.

He woke in the morning all of a sudden, with a kind of tranquil joy and purpose; and when he was dressed, and gone into the hall, he found Mistress Alison sitting in her chair beside the table laid for their meal. She was silent and looked troubled, and Paul went up softly to her, and kissed her and said, "I have chosen." She did not need to ask him what he had chosen, but put her arm about him and said, "Then, dear Paul, be content—and we will have one more day together, the last of the old days; and to-morrow shall the new life begin."

So the two passed a long and quiet day together. For to the wise and loving-hearted woman this was the last of sweet days, and her soul went out to the past with a great hunger of love; but she stilled it as was her wont, saying to herself that this dear passage of life had hitherto only been like the clear trickling of a woodland spring, while the love of the Father's heart was as it were a

great river of love marching softly to a wide sea, on which river the very world itself floated like a flower-bloom between widening banks.

And indeed if any had watched them that day, it would have seemed that she was the serener; for the thought of the life that lay before him worked like wine in the heart of Paul, and he could only by an effort bring himself back to loving looks and offices of tenderness. They spent the whole day together, for the most part in a peaceful silence; and at last the sun went down, and a cool breeze came up out of the west, laden with scent from miles and miles of grass and flowers, which seemed to bear with it the fragrant breath of myriads of sweet living things.

Then they ate together what was the last meal they were to take thus alone. And at last Mistress Alison would have Paul go to rest. And so she took his hand in hers, and said, "Dear child, the good years are over now; but you will not forget them; only lean upon the Father, for He is very strong; and remember that though the voice of melody is sweet, yet the loving heart is deeper yet." And then Paul suddenly broke out into a passion of weeping, and kissed his old friend on hand and cheek and lips; and then he burst away, ashamed, if the truth be told, that his love was not deeper than he found it to be.

He slept a light sleep that night, his head pillowed on his hand, with many strange dreams ranging through his head. Among other fancies, some sweet, some dark, he heard a delicate passage of melody played, it seemed to him, by three silver-sounding flutes, so delicate that he could hardly contain himself for gladness; but among his sadder dreams was one of a little man habited like a minstrel who played an ugly enchanted kind of melody on a stringed lute, and smiled a treacherous smile at him; Paul woke in a sort of fever of the spirit; and rising from his bed, felt the floor cool to his feet, and drew his curtain aside; in a tender radiance of dawn he saw the barn, deep in shadow, in the little garden; and over them a little wood-end that he knew well by day—a simple place enough—but flow it had a sort of magical dreaming air; the mist lay softly about it like the breath of sleep; and the trees, stretching wistfully their leafy arms, seemed to him to be full of silent prayer, or to be hiding within them some divine secret that might not be shown to mortal eyes. He looked long at this; and presently went back to his bed, and shivered in a delicious warmth, while outside, very gradually, came the peaceful stir of morning. A bird or two fluted drowsily in the bushes; then another further away would join his slender song; a cock crew cheerily in a distant grange, and soon it was broad day. Presently the house began to be softly astir; and the faint fragrance of an early kindled fire of wood stole into the room. Then, worn out by his long vigil, he fell asleep again; and soon waking, knew it to be later than was his wont, and dressed with haste. He came down, and heard voices in the hall; he went in, and there saw Mistress Alison in her chair; and on the hearth, talking gaily and cheerily, stood Mark the minstrel. They made a pause when he came in. Mark extended his hand, which Paul took with a kind of reverence. Then Mistress Alison, with her sweet old smile, said to Paul, "So you made a pilgrimage to the Well of the Heart's Desire, dear Paul? Well, you have your wish, and very soon; for here is a master for you, if you will serve him." "Not a light service, Paul," said Mark gravely, "but a true one. I can take you with me when you may go, for my boy Jack is fallen sick with a stroke of the sun, and must bide at home awhile." They looked at Paul, to see what he would say. "Oh, I will go gladly," he said, "if I may." And then he felt he had not spoken lovingly; so he kissed Mistress Alison, who smiled, but somewhat sadly, and said, "Yes, Paul—I understand."

So when the meal was over, Paul's small baggage was made ready, and he kissed Mistress Alison—and then she said to Mark with a sudden look, "You will take care of him?" "Oh, he shall be safe with me," said Mark, "and if he be apt and faithful, he shall learn his trade, as few

can learn it.” And then Paul said his good-bye, and walked away with Mark; and his heart was so full of gladness that he stepped out lightly and blithely, and hardly looked back. But at the turn of the road he stopped, while Mark seemed to consider him gravely. The three that were to abide, Mistress Alison, and the maid, and the old gardener, stood at the door and waved their hands; the old house seemed to look fondly out of its windows at him, as though it had a heart; and the very trees seemed to wave him a soft farewell. Paul waved his hand too, and a tear came into his eyes; but he was eager to be gone; and indeed, in his heart, he felt almost jealous of even the gentle grasp of his home upon his heart. And so Mark and Paul set out for the south.

II

Of the life that Paul lived with Mark I must not here tell; but before he grew to full manhood he had learned his art well. Mark was a strict master, but not impatient. The only thing that angered him was carelessness or listlessness; and Paul was an apt and untiring pupil, and learnt so easily and deftly that Mark was often astonished. “How did you learn that?” he said one day suddenly to Paul when the boy was practising on the lute, and played a strange soft cadence, of a kind that Mark had never heard. The boy was startled by the question, for he had not thought that Mark was listening to him. He looked up with a blush and turned his eyes on Mark. “Is it not right?” he said. “I did not learn it; it comes from somewhere in my mind.”

Paul learnt to play several instruments, both wind and string. Sometimes he loved one sort the best, sometimes the other. The wind instruments of wood had to him a kind of soft magic, like the voice of a gentle spirit, a spirit that dwelt in lonely unvisited places, and communed more with things of earth than the hearts of men. In the flutes and bassoons seemed to him to dwell the voices of airs that murmured in the thickets, the soft gliding of streams, the crooning of serene birds, the peace of noonday, the welling of clear springs, the beauty of little waves, the bright thoughts of stars. Sometimes in certain modes, they could be sad, but it was the sadness of lonely homeless things, old dreaming spirits of wind and wave, not the sadness of such things as had known love and lost what they had loved, but the melancholy of such forlorn beings as by their nature were shut out from the love that dwells about the firelit hearth and the old roofs of homesteads. It was the sadness of the wind that wails in desolate places, knowing that it is lonely, but not knowing what it desires; or the soft sighing of trees that murmur all together in a forest, dreaming each its own dream, but with no thought of comradeship or desire.

The metal instruments, out of which the cunning breath could draw bright music, seemed to him soulless too in a sort, but shrill and enlivening. These clarions and trumpets spoke to him of brisk morning winds, or the cold sharp plunge of green waves that leap in triumph upon rocks. To such sounds he fancied warriors marching out at morning, with the joy of fight in their hearts, meaning to deal great blows, to slay and be slain, and hardly thinking of what would come after, so sharp and swift an eagerness of spirit held them; but these instruments he loved less.

Best of all he loved the resounding strings that could be twanged by the quill, or swept into a heavenly melody by the finger-tips, or throb beneath the strongly drawn bow. In all of these lay the secrets of the heart; in these Paul heard speak the bright dreams of the child, the vague hopes of growing boy or girl, the passionate desires of love, the silent loyalty of equal friendship, the dreariness of the dejected spirit, whose hopes have set like the sun smouldering to his fall, the rebellious grief of the heart that loses what it loves, the darkening fears that begin to roll about the ageing mind, like clouds that weep on mountain tops, and the despair of sinners, finding the evil too strong.

Best of all it was when all these instruments could conspire together to weave a sudden dream of beauty that seemed to guard a secret. What was the secret? It seemed so near to Paul sometimes, as if he were like a man very near the edge of some mountain from which he may peep into an unknown valley. Sometimes it was far away. But it was there, he doubted not, though it hid itself. It was like a dance of fairies in a forest glade, which a man could half discern through the screening leaves; but, when he gains the place, he sees nothing but tall flowers with drooping bells, bushes set with buds, large-leaved herbs, all with a silent, secret, smiling air, as though they said, "We have seen, we could tell."

Paul seemed very near this baffling secret at times; in the dewy silence of mornings, just before the sun comes up, when familiar woods and trees stand in a sort of musing happiness; at night when the sky is thickly sown with stars, or when the moon rises in a soft hush and silvers the sleeping pool; or when the sun goes down in a rich pomp, trailing a great glow of splendour with him among cloudy islands, all flushed with fiery red. When the sun withdrew himself thus, flying and flaring to the west, behind the boughs of leafless trees, what was the hidden secret presence that stood there as it were finger on lip, inviting yet denying? Paul knew within himself that if he could but say or sing this, the world would never forget. But he could not yet.

Then, too, Paul learned the magic of words, the melodious accent of letters, sometimes so sweet, sometimes so harsh; then the growing phrase, the word that beckons as it were other words to join it trippingly; the thought that draws the blood to the brain, and sets the heart beating swiftly—he learned the words that sound like far-off bells, or that wake a gentle echo in the spirit, the words that burn into the heart, and make the hearer ashamed of all that is hard and low. But he learned, too, that the craftsman in words must not build up his song word by word, as a man fetches bricks to make a wall; but that he must see the whole thought clear first, in a kind of divine flash, so that when he turns for words to write it, he finds them piled to his hand.

All these things Paul learnt, and day by day he suffered all the sweet surprises and joys of art. There were days that were not so, when the strings jangled aimlessly, and seemed to have no soul in them; days when it appeared that the cloud could not lift, as though light and music together were dead in the world—but these days were few; and Paul growing active and strong, caring little what he ate and drank, tasting no wine, because it fevered him at first, and then left him ill at ease, knowing no evil or luxurious thoughts, sleeping lightly and hardly, found his spirits very pure and plentiful; or if he was sad, it was a clear sadness that had something beautiful within it, and dwelt not on any past grossness of his own, but upon the thought that all beautiful things can but live for a time, and must then be laid away in the darkness and in the cold.

So Paul grew up knowing neither friendship nor love, only stirred at the sight of a beautiful face, a shapely hand, or a slender form; by a grateful wonder for what was so fair; untainted by any desire to master it, or make it his own; living only for his art, and with a sort of blind devotion to Mark, whom he soon excelled, though he knew it not. Mark once said to him, when Paul had made a song of some old forgotten sorrow, "How do you know all this, boy? You have not suffered, you have not lived!" "Oh," said Paul gaily, knowing it to be praise, "my heart tells me it is so."

Paul, too, as he grew to manhood, found himself with a voice that was not loud, but true—a voice that thrilled those who heard it through and through; but it seemed strange that he felt not what he made other men feel; rather his music was like a still pool that can reflect all that is above it, the sombre tree, the birds that fly over, the starry silence of the night, the angry redness of the dawn.

It was on one of his journeys with Mark that the news of Mistress Alison's death reached him. Mark told him very carefully and tenderly, and while he repeated the three or four broken words in which Mistress Alison had tried to send a last message to Paul—for the end had come very suddenly—Mark himself found his voice falter, and his eyes fill with tears. Paul had, at that sight, cried a little; but his life at the House of Heritage seemed to have faded swiftly out of his thoughts; he was living very intently in the present, scaling, as it were, day by day, with earnest effort, the steep ladder of song. He thought a little upon Mistress Alison, and on all her love and goodness: but it was with a tranquil sorrow, and not with the grief and pain of loss. Mark was very gentle with him for awhile; and this indeed did shame Paul a little, to find himself being used so lovingly for a sorrow which he was hardly feeling. But he said to himself that sorrow must come unbidden, and that it was no sorrow that was made with labour and intention.

He was a little angered with himself for his dullness—but then song was so beautiful, that he could think of nothing else; he was dazzled.

A little while after, Mark asked him whether, as they were near at hand, he would turn aside to see Mistress Alison's grave. And Paul said, "No; I would rather feel it were all as it used to be!"—and then seeing that Mark looked surprised and almost grieved, Paul, with the gentle hypocrisy of childhood, said, "I cannot bear it yet," which made Mark silent, and he said no more, but used Paul more gently than ever.

One day Mark said to him, very gravely, as if he had long been pondering the matter, "It is time for me to take another pupil, Paul. I have taught you all I know; indeed you have learned far more than I can teach." Then he told him that he had arranged all things meetly. That there was a certain Duke who lacked a minstrel, and that Paul should go and abide with him. That he should have his room at the castle, and should be held in great honour, making music only when he would. And then Mark would have added some words of love, for he loved Paul as a son. But Paul seemed to have no hunger in his heart, no thought of the days they had spent together; so Mark said them not. But he added very gently, "And one thing, Paul, I must tell you. You will be a great master—indeed you are so already—and I can tell you nothing about the art that you do not know. But one thing I will tell you—that you have a human heart within you that is not yet awake: and when it awakes, it will be very strong; so that a great combat, I think, lies before you. See that it overcome you not!" And Paul said wondering, "Oh, I have a heart, but it is altogether given to song. And so Mark was silent.

Then Paul went to the Duke's Castle of Wresting and abode with him year after year. Here, too, he made no friend; he was gracious with all, and of a lofty courtesy, so that he was had in reverence; and he made such music that the tears would come into the eyes of those who heard him, and they would look at each other, and wonder how Paul could thus tell the secret hopes of the heart. There were many women in the castle, great ladies, young maidens, and those that attended on them. Some of these would have proffered love to Paul, but their glances fell before a certain cold, virginal, almost affronted look, that he turned to meet any smile or gesture that seemed to hold in it any personal claim, or to offer any gift but that of an equal and serene friendship. As a maiden of the castle once said, provoked by his coldness, "Sir Paul seems to have everything to say to all of us, but nothing to any one of us." He was kind to all with a sort of great and distant courtesy that was too secure even to condescend. And so the years passed away.

III

It was nearly noon at the Castle of Wresting, and the whole house was deserted, for the Duke had ridden out at daybreak to the hunt; and all that could find a horse to ride had gone with him; and, for it was not far afield, all else that could walk had gone afoot. So bright and cheerful a day was it that the Duchess had sent out her pavilion to be pitched in a lawn in the wood, and the Duke with his friends were to dine there; none were left in the castle save a few of the elder serving-maids, and the old porter, who was lame. About midday, however, it seemed that one had been left; for Paul, now a tall man, strongly built and comely, yet with a somewhat dreamful air, as though he pondered difficult things within himself, and a troubled brow, under which looked out large and gentle eyes, came with a quick step down a stairway. He turned neither to right nor left, but passed through the porter's lodge. Here the road from the town came up into the castle on the left, cut steeply in the hill, and you could see the red roofs laid out like a map beneath, with the church and the bridge; to the right ran a little terrace under the wall. Paul came through the lodge, nodding gravely to the porter, who returned his salute with a kind of reverence; then he walked on to the terrace, and stood for a moment leaning against the low wall that bounded it; below him lay for miles the great wood of Wresting, now all ablaze with the brave gold of autumn leaves; here was a great tract of beeches all rusty red; there was the pale gold of elms. The forest lay in the plain, here and there broken by clearings or open glades; in one or two places could be seen the roofs of villages, with the tower of a church rising gravely among trees. On the horizon ran a blue line of downs, pure and fine above the fretted gold of the forest. The air was very still, with a fresh sparkle in it, and the sun shone bright in a cloudless heaven; it was a day when the heaviest heart grows light, and when it seems the bravest thing that can be designed to be alive.

Once or twice, as Paul leaned to look, there came from the wood, very far away, the faint notes of a horn; he smiled to hear it, and it seemed as though some merry thought came into his head, for he beat cheerfully with his fingers on the parapet. Presently he seemed to bethink himself, and then walked briskly to the end of the terrace, where was a little door in the wall; he pushed this open, and found himself at the head of a flight of stone steps, with low walls on either hand, that ran turning and twisting according to the slope of the hill, down into the wood.

Paul went lightly down the steps; once or twice he turned and looked up at the grey walls and towers of the castle, rising from the steep green turf at their foot, above the great leafless trees—for the trees on the slope lost their leaves first in the wind. The sight pleased him, for he smiled again. Then he stood for a moment, lower down, to watch the great limbs and roots of a huge beech that seemed to cling to the slope for fear of slipping downwards. He came presently to a little tower at the bottom that guarded the steps. The door was locked; he knocked, and there came out an old woman with a merry wrinkled face, who opened it for him with a key, saying, "Do you go to the hunt, Sir Paul?" "Nay," he said, smiling, "only to walk a little alone in the wood." "To make music, perhaps?" said the old woman shyly. "Perhaps," said Paul, smiling, "if the music come — but it will not always come for the wishing."

As Paul walked in the deep places of the wood, little by little his fresh holiday mood died away, and there crept upon him a shadow of thought that had of late been no stranger to him. He asked himself, with some bitterness, what his life was tending to. There was no loss of skill in his art; indeed it was easier to him than ever; he had a rich and prodigal store of music in him, music both of word and sound, that came at his call. But the zest was leaving him. He had attained to his utmost desire, and in his art there was nothing more to conquer. But as he looked round about

him and saw all the beautiful chains of love multiplying themselves about those among whom he lived, he began to wonder whether he was not after all missing life itself. He saw children born, he saw them growing up; then they, too, found their own path of love, they married, or were given in marriage; presently they had children of their own; and even death itself, that carried well-loved souls into the dark world, seemed to forge new chains of faith and loyalty. All this he could say and did say in his music. He knew it, he divined it by some magical instinct; he could put into words and sounds the secrets that others could not utter—and there his art stopped. It could not bring him within the charmed circle—nay, it seemed to him that it was even like a fence that kept him outside. He looked forward to a time when his art of itself must fade, when other minstrels should arise with new secrets of power; and what would become of him then?

He had by this time walked very far into the wood, and as he came down through a little rise, covered with leafy thickets, he saw before him a green track, that wound away among the trees. He followed it listlessly. The track led him through a beech wood; the smooth and shapely stems, that stood free of undergrowth, thickly roofed over by firm and glossy autumn foliage, with the rusty fallen floor of last year's leaves underfoot, brought back to him his delight in the sweet and fresh world—so beautiful, whatever the restless human heart desired in its presence.

He became presently aware that he was approaching some dwelling, he knew not what; and then the trees grew thinner; and in a minute he was out in a little forest clearing, where stood, in a small and seemly garden, enclosed with hedges and low walls and a moat, a forest lodge, a long low ancient building, ending in a stone tower.

The place had a singular charm. The ancient battlemented house, overgrown with ivy, the walls green and grey with lichens, seemed to have sprung as naturally out of the soil as the trees among which it stood, and to have become one with the place. He lingered for a moment on the edge of the moat, looking at a little tower that rose out of the pool, mirrored softly in the open spaces of the water, among the lily-leaves. The whole place seemed to have a wonderful peace about it; there was no sound but the whisper of leaves, and the doves crooning, in their high branching fastnesses, a song of peace.

As Paul stood thus and looked upon the garden, a door opened, and there came out a lady, not old, but well advanced in years, with a shrewd and kindly face; and then Paul felt a sort of shame within him, for standing and spying at what was not his own; and he would have hurried away, but the lady waved her hand to him with a courtly air, as though inviting him to approach. So he came forward, and crossing the moat by a little bridge that was hard by, he met her at the gate. He doffed his hat, and said a few words asking pardon for thus intruding on a private place, but she gave him a swift smile and said, "Sir Paul, no more of this—you are known to me, though you know me not. I have been at the Duke's as a guest; I have heard you sing—indeed," she added smiling, "I have been honoured by having been made known to the prince of musical men—but he hath forgotten my poor self; I am the Lady Beck-with, who welcomes you to her poor house—the Isle of Thorns, as they call it—and will deem it an honour that you should set foot therein; though I think that you came not for my sake."

"Alas, madam, no," said Paul, smiling too. "I did but walk solitary in the forest; I am lacking in courtesy, I fear; I knew not that there was a house here, but it pleased me to see it lie like a jewel in the wood."

"You knew not it was here, or you would have shunned it!" said the Lady Beckwith with a smile. "Well, I live here solitary enough with my daughters—my husband is long since dead—but to-day we must have a guest—you will enter and tarry with us a little?"

“Yes, very willingly,” said Paul, who, like many men that care not much for company, was tenderly courteous when there was no escape. So after some further passages of courtesy, they went within.

The Lady Beckwith led him into a fair tapestried room, and bade him be seated, while she went to call upon her servants to make ready refreshments for him. Paul seated himself in an oak chair and looked around him. The place was but scantily furnished, but Paul had pleasure in looking upon the old solid furniture, which reminded him of the House of Heritage and of his far-off boyhood. He was pleased, too, with the tapestry, which represented a wood of walnut-trees, and a man that sat looking upon a stream as though he listened; and then Paul discerned the figure of a brave bird wrought among the leaves, that seemed to sing; while he looked, he heard the faint sound in a room above of some one moving; then a lute was touched, and then there rose a soft voice, very pure and clear, that sang a short song of long sweet notes, with a descant on the lute, ending in a high drawn-out note, that went to Paul’s heart like wine poured forth, and seemed to fill the room with a kind of delicate fragrance.

Presently the Lady Beckwith returned; and they sat and talked awhile, till there came suddenly into the room a maiden that seemed to Paul like a rose; she came almost eagerly forward; and Paul knew in his mind that it was she that had sung; and there passed through his heart a feeling he had never known before; it was as though it were a string that thrilled with a kind of delicious pain at being bitten by the touch of a finger to utter its voice.

“This is my daughter Margaret,” said the Lady Beckwith; “she knows your fame in song, but she has never had the fortune to hear you sing, and she loves song herself.”

“And does more than love it,” said Paul almost tremblingly, feeling the eyes of the maiden set upon his face; “for I heard but now a lute touched, and a voice that sang a melody I know not, as few that I know could have sung it.”

The maiden stood smiling at him, and then Paul saw that she carried a lute in her hand; and she said eagerly, “Will you not sing to us, Sir Paul?”

“Nay,” said the Lady Beckwith, smiling, “but this is beyond courtesy I It is to ask a prince to our house, and beg for the jewels that he wears.”

The maiden blushed rosy red, and put the lute by; but Paul stretched out his hand for it. “I will sing most willingly,” he said. “What is my life for, but to make music for those who would hear?”

He touched a few chords to see that the lute was well tuned; and the lute obeyed his touch like a living thing; and then Paul sang a song of springtime that made the hearts of the pair dance with joy. When he had finished, he smiled, meeting the smiles of both; and said, “And now we will have a sad song—for those are ever the sweetest—joy needs not to be made sweet.”

So he sang a sorrowful song that he had made one winter day, when he had found the body of a little bird that had died of the frost and the hard silence of the unfriendly earth—a song of sweet things broken and good times gone by; and before he had finished he had brought the tears to the eyes of the pair. The Lady Beckwith brushed them aside—but the girl sat watching him, her hands together, and a kind of worship in her face, with the bright tears, trembling on her cheeks. And Paul thought he had never seen a fairer thing; but wishing to dry the tears, he made a little merry song, like the song of gnats that dance up and down in the sun, and love their silly play—so that the two smiled again.

Then they thanked him very urgently, and Margaret said, “If only dear Helen could hear this” and the Lady Beckwith said, “Helen is my other daughter, and she lies abed, and may not come forth.”

Then they put food before him; and they ate together, Margaret serving him with meat and wine; and Paul would have forbidden it, but the Lady Beckwith said, "That is the way of our house—and you are our guest and must be content—for Margaret loves to serve you." The girl said little, but as she moved about softly and deftly, with the fragrance of youth about her, Paul had a desire to draw her to him, that made him ashamed and ill at ease. So the hours sped swiftly. The maiden talked little, but the Lady Beckwith had much matter for little speech; she asked Paul many questions, and told him something of her own life, and how, while the good Sir Harry, her husband, lived, she had been much with the world, but now lived a quiet life, "Like a wrinkled apple-tree behind a house," she added with a smile, "guarding my fruit, till it be plucked from the bough." And she went on to say that though she had feared, when she entered the quiet life, the days would hang heavy, yet there never seemed time enough for all the small businesses that she was fain to do.

When the day began to fall, and the shadows of the trees out of the forest began to draw nearer across the lawn, Paul rose and said, "Come, I will sing you a song of farewell and thanks for this day of pleasure," and he made them a cheerful ditty; and so took his leave, the Lady Beckwith saying that they would speak of his visit for many days—and that she hoped that if his fancy led him again through the wood, he would come to them; "For you will find an open door, and a warm hearth, and friends who look for you." So Paul went, and walked through the low red sunset with a secret joy in his heart; and never had he sung so merrily as he sang that night in the hall of the Duke; so that the Duke said smiling that they must often go a-hunting, and leave Sir Paul behind, for that seemed to fill him to the brim with divine melody.

Now Paul that night, before he laid him down to sleep, stood awhile, and made a prayer in his heart. It must be said that as a child he had prayed night and morning, in simple words that Mistress Alison had taught him, but in the years when he was with Mark the custom had died away; for Mark prayed not, and indeed had almost an enmity to churches and to priests, saying that they made men bound who would otherwise be free; and he had said to Paul once that he prayed the best who lived nobly and generously, and made most perfect whatever gift he had; who was kind and courteous, and used all men the same, whether old or young, great or little; adding, "That is my creed, and not the creed of the priests—but I would not have you take it from me thus—a man may not borrow the secret of another's heart, and wear it for his own. All faiths are good that make a man live cleanly and lovingly and laboriously: and just as all men like not the same music, so all men are not suited with the same faith; we all tend to the same place, but by different ways; and each man should find the nearest way for him." Paul, after that, had followed his own heart in the matter; and it led him not wholly in the way of the priests, but not against them, as it led Mark. Paul took some delight in the ordered solemnities of the Church, the dark coolness of the arched aisles, the holy smell—he felt there the nearer to God. And to be near to God was what Paul desired; but he gave up praying at formal seasons, and spoke with God in his heart, as a man might speak to his friend, whenever he was moved to speak; he asked His aid before the making of a song; he told Him when he was disheartened, or when he desired what he ought not; he spoke to Him when he had done anything of which he was ashamed; and he told Him of his dreams and of his joys. Sometimes he would speak thus for half a day together, and feel a quiet comfort, like a strong arm round him; but sometimes he would be silent for a long while.

Now this night he spoke in his heart to God, and told Him of the sweet and beautiful hope that had come to him, and asked Him to make known to him whether it was His will that he should put forth his hand, and gather the flower of the wood—for he could not even in his secret heart

bring himself that night to speak, even to God, directly about the maiden; but, in a kind of soft reverence, he used gentle similitudes. And then he leaned from his window, and strove to send his spirit out like a bird over the sleeping wood, to light upon the tower; and then his thought leapt further, and he seemed to see the glimmering maiden chamber where she slept, breathing evenly. But even in thought this seemed to him too near, as though the vision were lacking in that awful reverence, which is the herald of love. So he thought that his spirit should sit, like a white bird, on the battlement, and send out a quiet song.

And then he fell asleep, and slept dreamlessly till the day came in through the casements; when he sprang up, and joy darted into his heart, as when a servitor fills a cup to the brim with rosy and bubbling wine.

Now that day, and the next, and for several days, Paul thought of little else but the house in the wood and the maiden that dwelt there. Even while he read or wrote, pictures would flash before his eye. He saw Margaret stand before him, with the lute in her hand; or he would see her as she had moved about serving him, or he would see her as she had sate to hear him sing, or as she had stood at the door as he went forth—and all with a sweet hunger of the heart; till it seemed to him that this was the only true thing that the world held, and he would be amazed that he had missed it for so long. That he was in the same world with her; that the air that passed over the house in the wood was presently borne to the castle; that they two looked upon the same sky, and the same stars—this was all to him like a delicate madness that wrought within his brain. And yet he could not bring himself to go thither. The greater his longing, the more he felt unable to go without a cause; and yet the thought that there might be other men that visited the Lady Beckwith, and had more of the courtly and desirable arts of life than he, was like a bitter draught—and so the days went on; and never had he made richer music; it seemed to rush from his brain like the water of a full spring.

A few days after, there was a feast at the castle and many were bidden; and Paul thought in his heart that the Lady Beckwith would perhaps be there. So he made a very tender song of love to sing, the song of a heart that loves and dares not fully speak.

When the hour drew on for the banquet, he attired himself with a care which he half despised, and when the great bell of the castle rang, he went down his turret stairs with a light step. The custom was for the guests to assemble in the great hall of the castle; but they of the Duke's household, of whom Paul was one, gathered in a little chamber off the hail. Then, when the Duke and Duchess with their children came from their rooms, they passed through this chamber into the hail, the household following. When the Duke entered the hall, the minstrels in the gallery played a merry tune, and the guests stood up; then the Duke would go to his place and bow to the guests, the household moving to their places; then the music would cease, and the choir sang a grace, all standing. Paul's place was an honourable one, but he sate with his back to the hall; and this night, as soon as he entered the hall, and while the grace was sung, he searched with his eyes up and down the great tables, but he could not see her whom he desired to see, and the joy died out of his heart. Now though the Lords and Knights of the castle honoured Paul because he was honoured by the Duke, they had little ease with him; so to-night, when Paul took his place, a Knight that sate next him, a shrewd and somewhat malicious man, who loved the talk of the Court, and turned all things into a jest, said, "How now, Sir Paul? You entered to-night full of joy; but now you are like one that had expected to see a welcome guest and saw him not." Then Paul was vexed that his thoughts should be so easily read, and said with a forced smile, "Nay, Sir Edwin, we musical men are the slaves of our moods; there would be no music else; we have not the bold and stubborn hearts of warriors born." And at this there was a smile, for Sir Edwin was

not held to be foremost in warlike exercise. But having thus said, Paul never dared turn his head. And the banquet seemed a tedious and hateful thing to him.

But at last it wore to an end, and healths had been drunk, and grace was sung; and then they withdrew to the Presence Chamber, where the Duke and Duchess sate upon chairs of state under a canopy, and the guests sate down on seats and benches. And presently the Duke sent courteous word to Paul that if he would sing they would gladly hear him. So Paul rose in his place and made obeisance, and then moved to a dais which was set at the end of the chamber; and a page brought him his lute. But Paul first made a signal to the musicians who were set aloft in a gallery, and they played a low descant; and Paul sang them a war-song with all his might, his voice ringing through the room. Then, as the voice made an end, there was a short silence, such as those who have sung or spoken from a full heart best love to hear—for each such moment of silence is like a rich jewel of praise—and then a loud cry of applause, which was hushed in a moment because of the presence of the Duke.

Then Paul made a bow, and stood carelessly regarding the crowd; for from long use he felt no uneasiness to stand before many eyes; and just as he fell to touching his lute, his eye fell on a group in a corner; the Lady Beckwith sate there, and beside her Margaret; behind whom sate a young Knight, Sir Richard de Benoit by name, the fairest and goodliest of all in the castle, whom Paul loved well; and he leaned over and said some words in the maiden's ear, who looked round shyly at him with a little smile.

Then Paul put out all his art, as though to recover a thing that he had nearly lost. He struck a sweet chord on the lute, and the talk all died away and left an utter silence; and Paul, looking at but one face, and as though he spoke but to one ear, sang his song of love. It was like a spell of magic; men and women turned to each other and felt the love of their youth rise in their hearts as sweet as ever. The Duke where he sate laid a hand upon the Duchess' hand and smiled. They that were old, and had lost what they loved, were moved to weeping—and the young men and maidens looked upon the ground, or at the singer, and felt the hot blood rise in their cheeks. And Paul, exulting in his heart, felt that he swayed the souls of those that heard him, as the wind sways a field of wheat, that bends all one way before it. Then again came the silence, when the voice ceased; a silence into which the last chords of the lute sank, like stones dropped into a still water. And Paul bowed again, and stepped down from the dais—and then with slow steps he moved to where the Lady Beckwith sate, and bowing to her, took the chair beside her.

Then came a tumbler and played many agile tricks before them; and then a company of mummers, with the heads of birds and beasts, danced and sported. But the Lady Beckwith said, "Sir Paul, I will tell you a tale. A bird of the forest alighted at our window-sill some days ago, and sang very sweetly to us—and we spread crumbs and made it a little feast; and it seemed to trust us, but presently it spread its wings and flew away, and it comes not again. Tell us, what shall we do to tempt the wild bird back?" And Paul, smiling in her face, said, "Oh, madam, the bird will return; but he leads, maybe, a toilsome life, gathering berries, and doing small businesses. The birds, which seem so free, live a life of labour; and they may not always follow their hearts. But be sure that your bird knows his friends; and some day, when he has opportunity, he will alight again. To him his songs seem but a small gift, a shallow twittering that can hardly please." "Nay," said the Lady Beckwith, "but this was a nightingale that knew the power of song, and could touch all hearts except his own; and thus, finding love so simple a thing to win, doubtless holds it light." "Nay," said Paul, "he holds it not light; it is too heavy for him; he knows it too well to trifle with it."

Then finding that the rest were silent, they too were silent. And so they held broken discourse; and ever the young Knight spoke in Margaret's ear, so that Paul was much distraught, but dared not seem to intervene, or to speak with the maiden, when he had held aloof so long.

Presently the Lady Beckwith said she had a boon to ask, and that she would drop her parables. And she said that her daughter Helen, that was sick, had been very envious of them, because she had not heard his songs, but only a soft echo of them through the chamber floor. "And perhaps, Sir Paul," she said, "if you will not come for friendship, you will come for mercy; and sing to my poor child, who has but few joys, a song or twain." Then Paul's heart danced within him, and he said, "I will come to-morrow." And soon after that the Duke went out and the guests dispersed; and then Paul greeted the Lady Margaret, and said a few words to her; but he could not please himself in what he said; and that night he slept little, partly for thinking of what he might have said: but still more for thinking that he would see her on the morrow.

So when the morning came, Paul went very swiftly through the forest to the Isle of Thorns. It was now turning fast to winter, and the trees had shed their leaves. The forest was all soft and brown, and the sky was a pearly grey sheet of high cloud; but a joy as of spring was in Paul's heart, and he smiled and sang as he went, though he fell at times into sudden silences of wonder and delight. When he arrived, the Lady Beckwith greeted him very lovingly, and presently led him into a small chamber that seemed to be an oratory. Here was a little altar very seemly draped, with stools for kneeling, and a chair or two. Near the altar, at the side, was a little door in the wall behind a hanging; the Lady Beckwith pulled the hanging aside, and bade Paul to follow; he found himself in a small arched recess, lit by a single window of coloured glass, that was screened from a larger room, of which it was a part, by a curtain. The Lady Beckwith bade Paul be seated, and passed beyond the curtain for an instant. The room within seemed dark, but there came from it a waft of the fragrance of flowers; and Paul heard low voices talking together, and knew that Margaret spake; in a moment she appeared at the entrance, and greeted him with a very sweet and simple smile, but laid her finger on her lips; and so slipped back into the room again, but left Paul's heart beating strangely and fiercely. Then the Lady Beckwith returned, and said in a whisper to Paul that it was a day of suffering for Helen, and that she could not bear the light. So she seated herself near him, and Paul touched his lute, and sang songs, five or six, gentle songs of happy untroubled things, like the voices of streams that murmur to themselves when the woods are all asleep; and between the songs he spoke not, but played airily and wistfully upon his lute; and for all that it seemed so simple, he had never put more art into what he played and sang. And at last he made the music die away to a very soft close, like an evening wind that rustles away across a woodland, and moves to the shining west. And looking at the Lady Beckwith, he saw that she had passed, on the wings of song, into old forgotten dreams, and sate smiling to herself, her eyes brimming with tears. And then he rose, and saying that he would not be tedious, put the lute aside, and they went out quietly together. And the Lady Beckwith took his hand in both her own and said, "Sir Paul, you are a great magician—I could not believe that you could have so charmed an old and sad-hearted woman. You have the key of the door of the land of dreams; and think not that I am ungrateful; that you, for whose songs princes contend in vain, should deign to come and sing to a maiden that is sick—how shall I repay it?" "Oh, I am richly repaid," said Paul, "the guerdon of the singer is the incense of a glad heart—and you may give me a little love if you can, for I am a lonely man." Then they smiled at each other, the smile that makes a compact without words.

Then they went down together, and there was a simple meal set out; and they ate together like old and secure friends, speaking little; but the Lady Beckwith told him somewhat of her daughter

Helen, how she had been fair and strong till her fifteenth year; and that since that time, for five weary years, she had suffered under a strange and wasting disease that nothing could amend. "But she is patient and cheerful beneath it, or I think my heart would break;—but I know," she added, and her mouth quivered as she spoke, "that she can hardly see another spring, and I would have her last days to be sweet. I doubt not," she went on, "the good and wise purposes of God, and I think that He often sends His bright angels to comfort her—for she is never sad—and when you sing as you sang just now, I seem to understand, and my heart says that it is well."

While they spoke the Lady Margaret came into the room, with a sudden radiance; and coming to Paul she kneeled down beside him, and kissed his hand suddenly, and said, "Helen thanks you, and I thank you, Sir Paul, for giving her such joy as you could hardly believe."

There came a kind of mist over Paul's eyes, to feel the touch of the lips that he loved so well upon his hand; but at the same time it appeared to him like a kind of sin that he who seemed to himself, in that moment, so stained and hard, should have reverence done him by one so pure. So he raised her up, and said, "Nay, this is not meet"; and he would have said many other words that rushed together in his mind, but he could not frame them right. But presently the Lady Beckwith excused herself and went; and then Paul for a sweet hour sate, and talked low and softly to the maiden, and threw such worship into his voice that she was amazed. But he said no word of love. And she told him of their simple life, and how her sister suffered. And then Paul feared to stay longer, and went with a mighty and tumultuous joy in his heart.

Then for many days Paul went thus to the Isle of Thorns—and the Lady Margaret threw aside her fear of him, and would greet him like a brother. Sometimes he would find her waiting for him at the gate, and then the air was suddenly full of a holy radiance. And the Lady Beckwith, too, began to use him like a son; but the Lady Helen he never saw—only once or twice he heard her soft voice speak in the dark room. And Paul made new songs for her, but all the time it was for Margaret that he sang.

And they at the castle wondered why Sir Paul, who used formerly to sit so much in his chamber, now went so much abroad. But he guarded his secret, and they knew not whither he went; only he saw once, from looks that passed between two of the maidens, that they spoke of him; and this in times past might have made him ashamed, but now his heart was too high, and he cared not.

There came a day when Paul, finding himself alone with the Lady Beckwith, opened his heart suddenly to her; but he was checked, as it were, by a sudden hand, for there came into her face a sad and troubled look, as though she blamed herself for something. Then she said to him, faltering, that she knew not what to say, for she could not read her daughter's heart—"and I think, Sir Paul," she added, "that she hath no thought of love—love of the sort of which you speak. Nay, the maiden loves you well, like a dear brother; she smiles at your approach, and runs to meet you when she hears your step at the door"; and then seeing a look of pain and terror in the face of Paul, she said, "Nay, dear Paul, I know not. God knows bow gladly I would bave it so, but hearts are very strangely made; yet you shall speak if you will, and I will give you my prayers." And then she stooped to Paul, and kissed his brow, and said, "There is a mother's kiss, for you are the son of my heart, whatever befall."

So presently the maiden came in, and Paul asked her to walk a little with him in the garden, and she went smiling; and then he could find no words at all to tell her what was in his heart, till she said, laughing, that he looked strangely, and that it seemed he had nought to say. So Paul took her hand, and told her all his love; and she looked upon him, smiling very quietly, neither trembling nor amazed, and said that she would be his wife if so he willed it, and that it was a

great honour; “and then,” she added, “you need not go from us, but you can sing to Helen every day.” Then he kissed her; and there came into his heart a great wave of tenderness, and he thanked God very humbly for so great a gift. Yet he somehow felt in his heart that he was not yet content, and that this was not how he had thought it would fall out; but he also told himself that he would yet win the maiden’s closer love, for he saw that she loved not as he loved. Then after a little talk they went together and told the Lady Beckwith, and she blessed them; but Paul could see that neither was she content, but that she looked at Margaret with a questioning and wondering look.

Then there followed very sweet days. It was soon in the springtime of the year; the earth was awaking softly from her long sleep, and was by gentle degrees arraying herself for her summer pomp. The primroses put out yellow stars about the tree roots; the hyacinths carpeted the woods with blue, and sent their sweet breath down the glade; and Paul felt strange desires stir in his heart, and rise like birds upon the air; and when he walked with the Lady Margaret among the copses, or rested awhile upon green banks, where the birds sang hidden in the thickets, his heart made continual melody, and rose in a stream of praise to God. But they spoke little of love; at times Paul would try to say something of what was in his mind; but the Lady Margaret heard him, sedately smiling, as though she were pleased that she could give him this joy, but as though she understood not what he said. She loved to hear of Paul’s life, and the places he had visited. And Paul, for all his joy, felt that in his love he was, as it were, voyaging on a strange and fair sea alone, and as though the maiden stood upon the shore and waved her hand to him. When he kissed her or took her hand in his own, she yielded to him gently and lovingly, like a child; and it was then that Paul felt most alone. But none the less was he happy, and day after day was lit for him with a golden light.

IV

One day there came a messenger for Paul, and brought him news that made him wonder: the House of Heritage had fallen, on Mistress Alison’s death, to a distant kinsman of her own and of his. This man, who was without wife or child, had lived there solitary, and it seemed that he was now dead; and he had left in his will that if Sir Paul should wish to redeem the house and land for a price, he should have the first choice to do so, seeing his boyhood had been spent there. Now Paul was rich, for he had received many great gifts and had spent little; and there came into his heart a great and loving desire to possess the old house. He told the Lady Beckwith and Margaret of this, and they both advised him to go and see it. So Paul asked leave of the Duke, and told him his business. Then the Duke said very graciously that Paul had served him well, and that he would buy the house at his own charges, and give it to Paul as a gift; but he added that this was a gift for past service, and that he would in no way bind Paul; but he hoped that Paul would still abide in the castle, at least for a part of the year, and make music for them. “For indeed,” said the Duke very royally, “it were not meet that so divine a power should be buried in a rustic grange, but it should abide where it can give delight. Indeed, Sir Paul, it is not only delight! but through your music there flows a certain holy and ennobling grace into the hearts of all who attentively hear you, and tames our wild and brutish natures into something worthier and more seemly.” Then Paul thanked the Duke very tenderly, and said that he would not leave him.

So Paul journeyed alone with an old man-at-arms, whom the Duke sent with him for his honour and security; and when he arrived at the place, he lodged at the inn. He found the House of Heritage very desolate, inhabited only by the ancient maid of Mistress Alison, now grown old

and infirm. So Paul purchased the house and land at the Duke's charges, and caused it to be repaired, within and without, and hired a gardener to dress and keep the ground. He was very impatient to be gone, but the matter could not be speedily settled; and though he desired to return to Wrestling, and to see Margaret, of whom he thought night and day, yet he found a great spring of tenderness rise up in his heart at the sight of the old rooms, in which little had been changed. The thought of his lonely and innocent boyhood came back to him, and he visited all his ancient haunts, the fields, the wood, and the down. He thought much, too, of Mistress Alison and her wise and gracious ways; indeed, sitting alone, as he often did in the old room at evening, it seemed to him almost as though she sate and watched him, and was pleased to know that he was famous, and happy in his love; so that it appeared to him as though she gave him a benediction from some far-off and holy place, where she abode and was well satisfied.

Then at last he was able to return; but he had been nearly six weeks away. He had moved into the house and lived there; and it had filled him with a kind of solemn happiness to picture how he would some day, when he was free, live there with Margaret for his wife; and perhaps there would be children too, making the house sweet with their laughter and innocent games—children who should look at him with eyes like their mother's. Long hours would pass thus while he sate holding a book or his lute between his hands, the time streaming past in a happy tide of thoughts.

But the last night was sad, for he had gone early to his bed, as he was to start betimes in the morning; and he dreamed that he had gone through the wood to the Isle of Thorns, and had seen the house stand empty and shuttered close, with no signs of life about it. In his dream he went and beat upon the door, and heard his knocks echo in the hall; and just as he was about to beat again, it was opened to him by an old small woman, that looked thin and sad, with grey hair and many wrinkles, whom he did not know. He had thrust past her, though she seemed to have wished to stay him; and pushing on, had found Margaret sitting in the hall, who had looked up at him, and then covered her face with her hands, and he had seen a look of anguish upon her face. Then the dream had slipped from him, and he dreamed again that he was in a lonely place, a bleak mountain-top, with a wide plain spread out beneath; and he had watched the flight of two white birds, which seemed to rise from the rocks near him, and fly swiftly away, beating their wings in the waste of air.

He woke troubled, and found the dawn peeping through the chinks of the shutter; and soon he heard the tramping of horses without, and knew that he must rise and go. And the thought of the dream dwelt heavily with him; but presently, riding in the cool air, it seemed to him that his fears were foolish; and his love came back to him, so that he said the name Margaret over many times to himself, like a charm, and sent his thoughts forward, imagining how Margaret, newly risen, would be moving about the quiet house, perhaps expecting him. And then he sang a little to himself, and was pleased to see the old man-at-arms smile wearily as he rode beside him.

Three days after he rode into the Castle of Wrestling at sundown, and was greeted very lovingly; the Duke would not let him sing that night, though Paul said he was willing; but after dinner he asked him many questions of how he had fared. And Paul hoped that he might have heard some talk of the Lady Margaret. But none spoke of her, and he dared not ask. One thing that he noticed was that at dinner the young Sir Richard de Benoit sate opposite him, looking very pale; and Paul, more than once, looking up suddenly, saw that the Knight was regarding him very fixedly, as though he were questioning of somewhat; and that each time Sir Richard dropped his eyes as though he were ashamed. After dinner was over, and Paul had been discharged by the Duke, he had gone back into the hall to see if he could have speech of Sir Richard, and ask if anything ailed him; but he found him not.

Then on the morrow, as soon as he might, he made haste to go down to the Isle of Thorns. As he was crossing a glade, not far from the house, he saw to his surprise, far down the glade, a figure riding on a horse, who seemed for a moment to be Sir Richard himself. He stood awhile to consider, and then, going down the glade, he cried out to him. Sir Richard, who was on a white horse, drew rein, and turned with his hand upon the loins of the horse; and then he turned again, and, urging the horse forward, disappeared within the wood. There came, as it were, a chill into Paul's heart that he should be thus unkindly used; and he vexed his brain to think in what he could have offended the Knight; but he quickly returned to his thoughts of love; so he made haste, and soon came down to the place.

Now, when he came near, he thought for a moment of his dream; and shrank back from stepping out of the trees at the corner whence he could see the house; but chiding himself for his vain terrors, he went swiftly out, and saw the house stand as before, with the trees all delicate green behind it, and the smoke ascending quietly from the chimneys.

Then he made haste; and—for he was now used to enter unbidden—went straight into the house; the hall and the parlours were all empty; so that he called upon the servants; an old serving-maid came forth, and then Paul knew in a moment that all was not well. He looked at her for a moment, and a question seemed to be choked in his throat; and then he said swiftly, "Is the Lady Beckwith within?" The old serving-maid said gravely, "She is with the Lady Helen, who is very sick." Then Sir Paul bade her tell the Lady Beckwith that he was in the house; and as he stood waiting, there came a kind of shame into his heart, that what he had heard was so much less than what he had for an instant feared; and while he strove to be more truly sorry, the Lady Beckwith stood before him, very pale. She began to speak at once, and in a low and hurried voice told him of Helen's illness, and how that there was little to hope; and then she put her hand on Paul's arm, and said, "My son, why did you leave us?" adding hastily, "Nay, it could not have been otherwise." And Paul, looking upon her face, divined in some sudden way that she had not told him all that was in her mind. So he said, "Dear mother, you know the cause of that—but tell me all, for I see there is more behind." Then the Lady Beckwith put her face in her hands, and saying, "Yes, dear Paul, there is more," fell to weeping secretly. While they thus stood together—and Paul was aware of a deadly fear that clutched at his heart and made all his limbs weak—the Lady Margaret came suddenly into the room, looking so pale and worn that Paul for a moment did not recognise her. But he put out his arms, and took a step towards her; then he saw that she had not known he was in the house; for she turned first red and then very pale, and stepped backwards; and it went to Paul's heart like the stabbing of a sharp knife, that she looked at him with a look in which there was shame mingled with a certain fear.

Now while Paul stood amazed and almost stupefied with what he saw, the Lady Beckwith said quickly and almost sternly to Margaret, "Go back to Helen—she may not be left alone." Margaret slipped from the room; and the Lady Beckwith pointed swiftly to a chair, and herself sate down. Then she said, "Dear Paul, I have dreaded this moment and the sight of you for some days—and though I should wish to take thought of what I am to say to you, and to say it carefully, it makes an ill matter worse to dally with it—so I will even tell you at once. You must know that some three days after you left us, the young Knight Sir Richard de Benoit fell from his horse, when riding in the wood bard by this house, and was grievously hurt by the fall. They carried him in here and we tended him. I had much upon my hands, for dear Helen was in great suffering; and so it fell out that Margaret was often with the Knight—who, indeed, is a noble and generous youth, very pure and innocent of heart—and oh, Paul, though it pierces my heart to say it, he loves her—and I think that she loves him too. It is a strange and terrible thing, this love I it

is like the sword that the Lord Christ said that He came to bring on earth, for it divides loving households that were else at one together; and now I must say more—the maiden knew not before what love was; she had read of it in the old books; and when you came into this quiet house, bringing with you all the magic of song, and the might of a gentle and noble spirit, and offered her love, she took it gladly and sweetly, not knowing what it was that you gave; but I have watched my child from her youth up, and the love that she gave you was the love that she would have given to a brother—she admired you and revered you. She knew that maidens were asked and given in marriage, and she took your love, as a child might take a rich jewel, and love the giver of it. And, indeed, she would have wedded you, and might have learned to love you in the other way. But God willed it otherwise; and seeing the young Knight, it was as though a door was opened in her spirit, and she came out into another place. I am sure that no word of love has passed between them; but it has leaped from heart to heart like a swift fire; and all this I saw too late; but seeing it, I told Sir Richard how matters stood; and he is an honourable youth; for from that moment he sought how he might be taken hence, and made reasons to see no more of the maid. But his misery I could see; and she is no less miserable; for she has a very pure and simple spirit, and has fought a hard conflict with herself; yet will she hold to her word.

“And now, dear Paul, judge between us, for the matter lies in your hands. She is yours, if you claim her; but her heart cannot be yours awhile, though you may win it yet. It is true that both knights and maidens have wedded, loving another; yet they have learned to love each other, and have lived comfortably and happily; but whether, knowing what I have been forced to tell you, you can be content that things should be as before, I know not.”

Then the Lady Beckwith made a pause, and beat her hands together, watching Paul’s face; Paul sat very still and pale, all the light gone out of his eyes, with his lips pressed close together. And at the sight of him the tears came into Lady Beckwith’s eyes, and she could not stay them. And Paul, looking darkly on her, strove to pity her, but could not; and clasping the arms of his chair, said hoarsely, “I cannot let her go.” So they sat awhile in silence; and then Paul rose and said, “Dear lady, you have done well to tell me this—I know deep down in my heart what a brave and noble thing you have done: but I cannot yet believe it—I will see the Lady Margaret and question her of the matter.” Then the lady said, “Nay, dear Paul, you will not—you think that you would do so; but you could not speak with her face to face of such a matter, and she could not answer you. You must think of it alone, and to-morrow you must tell me what you decide; and whichever way you decide it, I will help you as far as I can.” And then she said, “You will pity me a little, dear Paul, for I had rather have had a hand cut off than have spoken with you thus.” And these simple words brought Paul a little to himself, and he rose from his place and kissed the Lady Beckwith’s hand, and said, “Dear mother, you have done well; but my sorrow is greater than I can bear.” And at that the Lady Beckwith wept afresh; but Paul went out in a stony silence, hardly knowing what he did.

Then it seemed to Paul as though he went down into deep waters indeed, which passed cold and silent, in horror and bitterness, over his soul. He did not contend or cry out; but he knew that the light had fallen out of his life, and had left him dark and dead.

So he went slowly back to the castle through the wood, hating his life and all that he was; once or twice he felt a kind of passion rise within him, and he said to himself, “She is pledged to me, and she shall be mine.” And then there smote upon him the thought that in thinking thus he was rather brute than man. And he fell at last into an agony of prayer that God would lead him to the light, and show him what he should do. When he reached the castle he put a strong constraint upon himself; he went down to the hall; he even sang; but it was like a dream; he seemed to be

out of the body, and as it were to see himself standing, and to hear the words falling from his own lips. The Duke courteously praised him, and said that he was well content to hear his minstrel again.

As he left the hall, he passed through a little anteroom, that was hung with arras, on the way to his chamber; and there he saw sitting on a bench, close to the door that led to the turret stair, the young Knight, Sir Richard; and there rose in his heart a passion of anger, so strong that he felt as though a hand were laid upon his heart, crushing it. And he stood still, and looked upon the Knight, who raised so pale and haggard a face upon him, that Paul, in spite of his own misery, saw before him a soul as much or more vexed than his own; and then the anger died out of his heart, and left in him only the sense of the bitter fellowship of suffering; the Knight rose to his feet, and they stood for a moment looking at each other; and then the Knight said, pale to the lips. "Sir Paul, we are glad to welcome you back—I have heard of the Duke's gift, and rejoice that your inheritance should thus return to you." And Paul bowed and said, "Ay, it is a great gift; but it seems that in finding it I have lost a greater." And then, seeing the Knight grow paler still, if that were possible, he said, "Sir Richard, let me tell you a parable; there was a little bird of the wood that came to my window, and made me glad—so that I thought of no other thing but my wild bird, that trusted me: and while I was absent, one hath whispered it away, and it will not return." And Sir Richard said, "Nay, Sir Paul, you are in this unjust. What if the wild bird hath seen its mate? And, for you know not the other side of the parable, its mate hath hid itself in the wood, and the wild bird will return to you, if you bid it come."

Then Sir Paul, knowing that the Knight had done worthily and like a true knight, said, "Sir Richard, I am unjust; but you will pardon me, for my heart is very sore." And so Paul passed on to his chamber; and that night was a very bitter one, for he went down into the sad valley into which men must needs descend, and he saw no light there. And once in the night he rose dry-eyed and fevered from his bed, and twitching the curtain aside, saw the forest lie sleeping in the cold light of the moon and his thought went out to the Isle of Thorns, and he saw the four hearts that were made desolate; and he questioned in his heart why God had made the hard and grievous thing that men call love.

Then he went back and fell into a sort of weary sleep; and waking therefrom, he felt a strange and terrible blackness seize upon his spirit, so that he could hear his own heart beat furious and thick in the darkness; and he prayed that God would release him from the prison of the world. But while he lay, he heard the feet of a horse clatter on the pavement, it being now near the dawn; and presently there came a page fumbling to the door, who bore a letter from the Lady Beckwith, and it ran:—

"I would not write to you thus, dear Paul, unless my need were urgent, but the dear Helen is near her end, and has prayed me many times that, if it were possible, you should come and sing to her—for she fears to go into the dark, and says that your voice can give her strength and hope. Now if it be possible, come; but if you say nay to my messenger, I shall well understand it. But the dear one hath done you no hurt, and for the love of the God who made us, come and comfort us—from her who loves you as a son, these."

Then Paul when he had read, pondered for awhile; and then he said to the page, "Say that I will come." So he arrayed himself with haste, and went swiftly through the silent wood, looking neither to left or to right, but only to the path at his feet. And presently he came to the Isle of Thorns; it lay in a sort of low silver mist, the house pushing through it, as a rock out of the sea. And then a sudden chill came over Paul, and the very marrow of his bones shuddered; for he

knew in his heart that this was nothing but the presaging of death; and he thought that the dreadful angel stood waiting at the door, and that presently the spirit of one that lay within must arise, leaving the poor body behind, and go with the angel.

In the high chamber where Helen lay burnt a light behind a curtain; and Paul saw a form pass slowly to and fro. And he would fain have pitied the two who must lose her whom they loved; but there passed over his spirit a sort of bitter wind; and he could feel no pity for any soul but his own, and his heart was dry as dust; he felt in his mind nothing but a kind of dumb wonder as to why he had troubled himself to come.

There must have been, he saw, a servant bidden to await his coming, because, as his feet sounded on the flags, the door was opened to him; and in a moment he was within the hall. At the well-known sights and scents of the place, the scene of his greatest happiness, the old aching came back into his stony heart, and grief, that was like a sharp sword, thrust through him. Suddenly, as he stood, a door opened, and Margaret came into the hall; she saw him in a moment; and he divined that she had not known he was within, but had meant only to pass through; for she stopped short as though irresolute, and looked at him with a wild and imploring gaze, like a forest thing caught in a trap.

In a moment there flowed into Paul's heart a great pity and tenderness, and a strength so wonderful that he knew it was not his own, but the immortal strength of God. And he stepped forward, forgetting all his own pain and misery, and said, "Margaret, dear one, dear sister, what is the shadow that hath fallen between us at this time? I would not," he went on, "speak of ourselves at such an hour as this; but I see that there is somewhat—we minstrels have a power to look in the heart of those we love—and I think it is this—that you can love me, dear one, as a brother, and not as a lover. Well, I am content, and so it shall be. I love you too well, little one, to desire any love but what you can give me—so brother and sister we will be." Then he saw a light come into her face, and she murmured words of sorrow that he could not hear; but he put his arm about her as a brother might, and kissed her cheek. And then she put her hands upon his shoulder, and her face upon them, and broke out into a passion of weeping. And Paul, saying "Even so," kissed and comforted her, as one might comfort a child, till she looked up, as if to inquire somewhat of him. And he said smiling, "So this is my dear sister indeed—yes, I will be content with that—and now take me to the dear Helen, that I may see if my art can comfort her." Then it was very sweet to Paul's sore heart that she drew her arm within his own and led him up from the room. Then there came in haste the Lady Beckwith down to meet them, with a look of pain upon her face; and Paul said, stub smiling, "We are brother and sister henceforth." Then the Lady Beckwith smiled too out of her grief and said, "Oh, it is well."

Then they passed together through the oratory and entered the chamber of death. And then Paul saw a heavenly sight. The room was a large one, dim and dark. In a chair near the fire, all in white, sate a maiden like a lily—so frail and delicate that she seemed like a pure spirit, not a thing of earth. She sate with a hand upraised between her and the fire; and when Paul came in, she looked at him with a smile in which appeared nothing but a noble patience, as though she had waited long; but she did not speak. Then they drew a chair for Paul, and he took his lute, and sang soft and low, a song of one who sinks into sweet dreams, when the sounds of day are hushed—and presently he made an end. Then she made a sign that Paul should approach, and he went to her, and kneeled beside her, and kissed her hand. And Margaret came out of the dark, and put her hand on Paul's shoulder saying, "This is our brother." And Helen smiled in Paul's face—and something, a kind of heavenly peace and love, seemed to pass from her eyes and settle in Paul's heart; and it was told him in that hour, he knew not how, that this was his bride whom

he had loved, and that he had loved Margaret for her sake; and that moment seemed to Paul to be worth all his life that had gone before, and all that should go after. So he knelt in the silence; and then in a moment, he knew not where or whence, the whole air seemed full of a heavenly music about them, such music as he had never dreamed of, the very soul and essence of the music of earth. But Helen laid her head back, and, smiling still, she died. And Paul laid her hand down.

Then without a word he rose, and went from the chamber; and he stepped out into the garden, and paced there wondering; he saw the trees stand silent in their sleep, and the flowers like stars in their dewy beds. And he knew that God was very near him; he put all his burdens and sorrows, his art, and all himself within the mighty hands; and he knew that he could never doubt again of the eternal goodness and the faithful tender love of the Father. And all the while the dawn slowly brightened over the wood, and came up very slowly and graciously out of the east. Then Paul gave word that he must return to the castle, but would come back soon. And as he mounted the steps, he saw that there was a man pacing on the terrace above, and knew that it was the Knight Richard, whom he sought. So he went up on the terrace, and there he saw the young Knight looking out over the forest; Paul went softly up to him and laid his hand upon his shoulder, and the Knight turned upon him a haggard and restless eye. Then Paul said, "Sir Richard, I come from the Isle of Thorns—but I have more to say to you. You are a noble Knight and have done very worthily—and I yield to you with all my heart the dear Margaret, for we are brother and sister, and nought else, now and henceforth." Then Sir Richard, as though he hardly heard him aright, stood looking upon his face; and Paul took his hand very gently in both his own, and said, "Yes, it is even so—and we will be brothers too." Then he went within the castle—and lying down in his chamber he slept peacefully like a little child.

V

Many years have passed since that day. First Sir Richard wedded the Lady Margaret, and dwelt at the Isle of Thorns. A boy was born to them, whom they named Paul, and a daughter whom they called Helen. And Paul was much with them, and had great content. He made, men said, sweeter music than ever he had done, in those days. Then the Duke died; and Paul, though his skill failed not, and though the King himself would have had him to his Court, went back to the House of Heritage, and there dwelt alone, a grave and kindly man, very simple of speech, and loving to walk and sit alone. And Sir Richard and the Lady Margaret bought an estate hard by and dwelt there.

Now Paul would make no more music, save that he sometimes played a little on the lute for the pleasure of the Lady Margaret; but he took into his house a boy whom he taught the art; and when he was trained and gone into the world, to make music of his own, Paul took another—so that as the years went on, he had sent out a number of his disciples to be minstrels; so his art was not lost and one of these, who was a very gracious child named Percival, he loved better than the rest, because he saw in him that he had a love for the art I more than for all the rewards of art. And once when they sate together, the boy Percival said, "Dear sir, may I ask you a question?" "A dozen, if it be your will," said Paul, smiling; "but, dear child, I know not if I can answer it." Then the boy said, "Why do you not make more music, dear sir? for it seems to me like a well that holds its waters close and deep, and will not give them forth." Then Paul said, smiling, "Nay, I have given men music of the best. But there are two reasons why I make no more; and I will tell you them, if you can understand them. The first is that many years ago I heard a music that shamed me; and that sealed the well." Then the boy said, musing, "Tell me the name of the

musician, dear Sir Paul, for I have heard that you were ever the first." Then Paul said, "Nay, I know not the name of the maker of it." Then the boy said, smiling, "Then, dear sir, it must have been the music of the angels." And Paul said, "Ay, it was that." Then the boy was silent, and sate in awe, while Paul mused, touching his lute softly. Then he roused himself and said, "And the second reason, dear child, is this. There comes a time to all that *make*—whether it be books or music or pictures—when they can make no new thing, but go on in the old manner, working with the fingers of age the dreams of youth. And to me this seems as it were a profane and unholy thing, that a man should use so divine an art thus unworthily; it is as though a host should set stale wine before his guests, and put into it some drug which should deceive their taste and I think that those who do this do it for two reasons either they hanker for the praise thereof, and cannot do without the honour—and that is unworthy—or they do it because they have formed the habit of it, and have nought to fill their vacant hours—and that is unworthy too. So hearing the divine music of which I spoke but now, I knew that I could attain no further; and that there was a sweet plenty of music in the hand of God, and that He would give it as men needed it; but that my own work was done. For each man must decide for himself when to make an end. And further, dear child, mark this! The peril for us and for all that follow art is to grow so much absorbed in our handiwork, so vain of it, that we think there is nought else in the world. Into that error I fell, and therein abode. But we are in this world like little children at school. God has many fair things to teach us, but we grow to love our play, and to think of nought else, so that the holy lessons fall on unheeding ears; but now I have put aside my play, and sit awhile listening to the voice of God, and to all that He may teach me; and the lesson is hard to spell; but I wait upon Him humbly and quietly, till He call me hence. And now we have talked enough, and we will go back to our music; and you shall play me that passage over, for you played it not deftly enough before."

Now it happened that a few days later Paul in his sleep dreamed a dream; and when he woke, he could scarce contain his joy; and the boy Percival, seeing him in the morning, marvelled at the radiance that appeared in his face; and a little later Paul bade him go across the fields to the Lady Margaret's house, and to bid her come to him, if she would, for he had something that he must tell her, and he might not go abroad. So Percival told the Lady Margaret; and she wondered at the message, and asked if Sir Paul was sick. And the boy said, "No, I never saw him so full of joy—so that I am afraid."

Then the Lady Margaret went to the House of Heritage; and Paul came to greet her at the door, and brought her in, and sate for awhile in silence, looking on her face. The Lady Margaret was now a very comely and sedate lady, and had held her son's child in her arms; and Paul was a grey-haired man; yet in his eyes she was still the maiden he had known. Then Paul, speaking very softly, said, "Dear Margaret, I have bidden you come hither, for I think I am called hence; and when I depart, and I know not when it may be, I would close my eyes in the dear house where I was nurtured." Then she looked at him with a sudden fear, but he went on, "Dear one, I have dreamed very oft of late of Helen—she stands smiling in a glory, and looks upon me. But this last night I saw more. I know not if I slept or waked, but I heard a high and heavenly music; and then I saw Helen stand, but she stood not alone; she held by the hand a child, who smiled upon me; and the child was like herself; but I presently discerned that the child had a look of myself as well; and she loosed the child's hand from her own, and the child ran to me and kissed me; and Helen seemed to beckon me; and then I passed into sleep again. But now I see the truth. The love that I bear her hath begotten, I think, a child of the spirit that hath never known a mortal birth; and the twain wait for me." And Margaret, knowing not what to say, but feeling that he

had seen somewhat high and heavenly, sate in silence; and presently Paul, breaking out of a muse, began to talk of the sweet days of their youth, and of the tender mercies of God. But while he spoke, he suddenly broke off, and held up his hand; and there came a waft of music upon the air. And Paul smiled like a tired child, and lay back in his chair; and as he did so a string of the lute that lay beside him broke with a sweet sharp sound. And the Lady Margaret fell upon her knees beside him, and took his hand; and then she seemed to see a cloudy gate, and two that stood together—a fair woman and a child; and up to the gate, out of a cloud, came swiftly a man, like one that reaches his home at last; and the three went in at the gate together, hand in hand;—and then the music came once again, and died upon the air.