

MY FRIEND

THEY have just told me that I cannot live beyond midnight. But this is no confession of guilt. Knowing that I was soon to see an unknown land, and that the friend I had won (the first and the last) loved me so dearly that he would be unhappy unless his hand were clasping mine—did I sin in my desire that he should go forth, and be waiting for me?

A fortnight ago I met him in the street. His head was hanging, his gait dejected, he was talking to himself. I stood watching him. As he approached, long before he really saw me, a change came over him: his figure grew erect, his face sharpened, his lips closed. He smiled strangely as our eyes met, and I felt exultant in the knowledge that such spontaneous gladness should never degenerate. I took his hand, and held it so long that the townsfolk looked and laughed.

'Gabriel,' I said, 'I have been dreaming of you again. I thought we had gone together to spend Sunday on the Naze of Blakelow.' A warm flush of pleasure spread over his face. 'Yes,' I went on, 'and you said in my dream that it was the last of the vignettes' (he had a way of calling our short holidays 'vignettes'), 'and I replied that this was on a grander scale.' He laughed, though I am sure he did not understand. 'If only you *would go*,' he made answer, 'I feel that I should be so much better for the mountain air. I am out of tune with all the world but you. I can start soon—in two hours, if you will.' So we met later. I looked on his dark face, and my heart leaped out to him. I forgot the acrimony of living with those whose only feeling for me was one of relationship; forgot the Dead Sea apples of my past, and felt joyful beyond expression: often pressing my hand to my heart, where the toy I carried nestled in its scarlet sheath.

Something in his face told me that he was sad. 'You are not happy now?' I said. 'I am not,' he replied. 'I am envious of you. Your life is so free: you have no business affairs to drag you to earth. But I shall be happy soon; it is good to be with you.' As for myself, I never was happier. My spirits rose quickly; from the far recesses of my brain I brought the wildest thoughts to lay before him. Flashes of inspira-

tion that only showed in his presence (sparks of divine fire, perhaps) spun themselves into one glittering string for his sake.

We were to sleep at the Eagle, a hostelry whose prosperity began dwindling with the decline of coaching. It lies eighteen miles from our town, midway between the hamlets Ashstraw and Glosboro. Neither of us had been there before; but the guide-book was explicit. The weather was dull; but it took no hold on me. We left the precincts of the town and reached the great moorland with its bridle-path. When the dense smoke of the furnaces had given place to fresh, heather-scented air, I essayed a question.

‘Are you still depressed?’

‘No,’ he cried, with his brown eyes full of mirth.

‘Then you are perfectly happy?’ said I. (It was always gratifying to be assured of this.)

‘I cannot be otherwise when I have left the town with you,’ he said.

And at this I took his arm, for it was always less painful to myself when I walked close to him. We began to talk of our dreams. Circumstances had bound him to a profession that chafed his very core; but Nature had given him aspirations, and mirrored him a future as great (if as worthless) as my own.

How daring I grew! Farther and farther I had ventured down the heretical abyss. Gabriel’s

face gleamed with amazement : he drank it all in greedily. Was it not curious that I, who knew how fast the end was nearing, should have dared to relax my hold upon those snatches of hope which are as straws to the drowning man? After a time I turned the discussion—if you may call a monologue discussion—to my favourite theme, which is death. I had grown so morbid that I could pile horror upon horror. I gloated on the orthodox eternity : I drew brave pictures of my childhood's Satan in his environment of fire and gloom. But after the sunset rain came down in torrents. In five minutes we were wet to the skin. My clothes were old, my shoes let water ; I had no umbrella, but walked under Gabriel's. Just before twilight the path left the heath, and descended abruptly to the grass-grown coach-road that runs along the side of the hill they call the Silver Patines. Evening fell. The rain hissed on the heather, and the wind, catching the few gnarled thorns, drew from them a dull, sonorous cry. The river, somewhat in flood, rushed over jagged stones ; a few moorland sheep were sheltering under the rocks that lined his banks. Owls, so unfamiliar with man that they rattled their wings well-nigh in our faces, went whirring through the air. They started a train of abstract reasoning in me as to the doctrine of transmigration.

'Ah, Pythagoras's metempsychosis!' I said to myself. I am certain that my tongue was silent ;

yet Gabriel smiled. I was slightly hurt, and, drawing my arm away, walked to the other side of the road, refusing to shelter beneath the umbrella. Soon came the knowledge that his smile contained no touch of contempt, but was only a glad movement for that he knew himself in such sympathy with me as to apprehend my unvoiced fancy. I hastened to his side, and begged him to forgive. But the charm was broken for a time. My thoughts had withered, my words were grown unpregnant. So his happiness fled, there came a sequence of those drossy moments when silence is loathsome, yet must be. We felt them keenly. My head grew hot with grief: I it was who had snapped the golden cord. We had not walked much further before Gabriel stopped and leaned his cheek on the wet stones of the wall. 'I wish that I were dead,' he murmured. 'I am tired.'

'Then shall we go back?' I said. 'Perhaps it would be best. We are both wet through: the inn may be uncomfortable—the rooms damp.'

He turned and gave me his hand. 'Go back?' he gasped: 'go back? Why—I wish—that I might pass—all my life thus!'

'With the shadows and the rain and the wind's howling,' I added laughingly, 'and no home, but inn after inn, strange bed after strange bed?'

'No home, and you with me!' he cried. 'Ah! I could forget everything if you were with me.'

By now we could see nothing afar from us. At intervals a sound as of heavy hoofs a-splash on the road warned us to go warily. Ever and anon we waded tiny gullies. Thrice blasts of warm air, from the airt in which we were going, fluttered about my cheek and my hands. I fancied, and said, that these were disembodied souls hustled by the storm. Gabriel could not feel them; and when I said that another and yet another had touched me, held out his hands without avail. The wind piped with a shriller sound, changing its tone to one that mystified me, for we had passed the region of trees. Long-drawn sighs came first, then chords of broken melody, then whisperings as it were in a foreign tongue. Why, we were nearing some Druid stones! Ten yards to the right they stood, in a perfect circle, stately and tall, their bases hid in ling.

Again a change in the wind's song: a thousand shrieks as though men were being tortured with sharp knives. I turned to Gabriel, and spoke; it seemed as if my voice leaped with the storm. 'Gabriel,' I cried. 'What is it?' His wan face came near to mine. 'I hear nothing,' he said. 'Come, let us hurry; it is getting late—they may not let us in.' And a change had come into his voice too; a troubled note, as if a dread had swept over him. 'You are not afraid?' I said lightly. He made no reply.

Suddenly, as I listened, the heavens were rent from end to end, and a flash of lightning leaped out: to laugh and dance and gambol on the hill-tops, and then skip hissing across the river.

A sacrificial hymn was beginning at the Circle—a naked and bleeding victim was bound to the altar—fire and water were there—the long-bearded priests shook their white robes—the sharp knife glittered—and my own stiletto waxed heavy, as it strove to draw me downwards. I lifted my hand: just to touch the smooth pearl handle! Again the skies opened, but with only a momentary gleam; one glance of the Almighty Eye. But it was not so swift as to prevent me from seeing the face of the Sacrifice. ‘They have taken him away,’ I faltered. ‘He was at my side an instant ago.’ Gabriel drew me away.

He was shivering. For the first time that night I thought of his health. ‘Let us run,’ I said. ‘Give me your hand.’ He lowered his umbrella (it was of small use now, for the wind had risen—risen!) and then, hand in hand like young children, we ran together. It was delightful; but we were tired. So our feet were soon stayed, and, standing at an abrupt turn of the valley, we were aware of a lonely light agleam in the darkness—the light of the first house we had remarked since our nightmare town. It disappeared ere we reached the threshold. A sign-

board flapped uneasily, and we found that our journey was done. It was a vision of gables, with dormers and oriels; immense beams here and there upheld a sodden thatch; the chimney stacks, huddled and incongruously set, gave forth no friendly smoke. With a mad desire to harangue, I ascended the perron-staircase, and grasping its scrolled balustrade, began:—‘Friend Gabriel, who listenest with the night bats and the darkness—what is the soul?’ (Heedless of the pelting rain and Gabriel’s tender lungs: brute that I was!) ‘Nay,’ I continued, ‘rather what is the body? That I can define: husks—husks—a frippery of flesh!’ The light came again, this time at an upper window. I struck the door with my fist; but nobody heeded.

A few nights before Gabriel and I had seen a strolling company play *Cymbeline*: so I began to mimic the stentorian voice of the Imogen. The keyhole, which was hard to find, was covered with a stiff and rusty scutcheon, which I had some difficulty in moving. At last, though, I could press my lips to the void, and ‘What, ho, Pisanio!’ I cried. Gabriel was too tired to smile; but footsteps came along the passage, and after a wearisome time the bolts were all undrawn, and the door opened as wide as the chain would run. A harsh and feeble voice came forth upon the night: ‘What do you want?’

‘Supper and a room,’ I said. Another minute, and we stood in a yellow-washed hall, hung at even distances with dusty stags’-heads. A few paintings of scriptural scenes, done in Guer-cino’s style and framed in black, were fixed between queer oak carvings, the subjects taken from the superstitions of Holy Church, for in the first I saw Christ, crowned with a great golden aureole, descending a ladder into flames that coiled snake-like about the bottom rungs.

I showed it to Gabriel; but he scarce seemed to heed. His eyes and mind were fixed on the woman who stood looking at us, the candle held above her head. To tell the truth, I never saw a stranger creature. She wore a long gown of amber cloth, padded voluminously, but unbuttoned at the bosom and showing her brown, wrinkled throat. Her feet were shoeless, and were covered with grey stockings. Her face was profoundly unhallowed. There were remains of marvellous beauty; unparalleled eyes, pure and light blue and unfathomably deep, under white, knotted, bushy brows. No other feature did I note, save loose, prehensile lips and rippling flaxen hair that fell, like a young girl’s, in great locks over her shoulders. In truth, she had sinned monstrously; and in punishment thereof Nature had gifted the most alluring of her sweetnesses with a perenneity of youth: so making her a frightful anomaly—a

terrifying Death-and-Life. She stood bowed ; her mouth twisting, her eyes falling with inquiry on me. Gabriel she scarce observed ; and I know not what in myself attracted her. I was excited, and could scarce repress my mirth. Yet, when I think of it, how oddly laughter would have rung along that mildewed passage ! How Sara in the painting of the Angel's Visit would have smiled a grimmer smile !

After a while, sighing heavily, she turned and led the way to a great room. Here she lighted two candles on the central table and, bidding us wait for a little, disappeared. We could hear her movements grow more and more distant. I sat on a tiny settee—(bah, how cold it was!)—whilst Gabriel wandered about, lifting the candle at times to the Italian landscapes painted on the panelling. 'The Colosseum !' he cried suddenly—'and not ruined, but in its full pride. See, I can't understand this !' He drew me towards the picture (poor Gabriel was always a lover of art),—I looked, and was amazed to see the building I had so often dreamed of glistening in the moonlight. But my gaze was not so deeply interested as his, and, leaving the picture, it fell upon the miniature of a young girl above the mantel-piece. A host of memories came, my eyes grew dim, my chin trembled. Surely—surely—the likeness was familiar ? Yet it could not be. The

woman with the web of flaxen hair, Lenore whom I had lost, but never loved, Lenore whom I had forgotten years ago. Lenore with a rose—a lust-flower—a flower of voluptu—warming the iciness of the breasts it glowed between! *Lenore! Lenore! Lenore!*

I could not show it to Gabriel. It was not Lenore. How should the portrait of the holy witch, who slept so peacefully, encounter me here of all places? Fie! An instant, and I had fallen to speculating as the jack-o'-lanthorn of my folly bade, when the hostess came back. She bore a pan of live coals and a bundle of fagots; these she threw on the hearth, so that a bright flame was soon leaping giddily up the chimney. 'Gentlemen,' she said, 'your chamber is making ready. Supper shall be laid anon.'

Gabriel and I went to the fireside now, and stood in the heat. He was silent but not unhappy: indeed the gleaming of his sunken eyes went far towards dispelling the passion awakened by the miniature. Again the woman entered, this time with a laden tray. She drew the table nearer the fire, and, having spread the cloth and arranged the quaint china, produced from a large press dishes of old-fashioned confections—rose-petals, clusterberries, and almond comfits. Also, there were birds dressed in a way that I had never seen before. We grew very hungry at the sight.

A sense of possession came over me: I was the host, Gabriel the guest. I assumed the honours. 'Pray, make yourself comfortable!' I said, and we both laughed until the lamplight fluttered. He could laugh best—with the most singleheartedness. Outside the wind cried like a beaten child, and the gusts in the corridors were as mournful as the last breaths of a dying man. As no rain beat upon the windows, I surmised that the weather was fair, and I drew one of the sombre curtains. But I could see nothing but blackness: so with a shudder and a joyful thanksgiving that we were indoors, I went back to the table.

The collation done, I rang for the dishes to be removed. When, after a long time, the woman came, her suspicious curiosity was gone, and she moved in apathy. As she left us for the last time, after placing two logs across the andirons, she courtesied foolishly. 'Gentlemen,' she said, 'the door of your chamber opens on the first landing. A fire is burning there: you will see the reflection when you wish to retire.'

Beside the hearth were two great leathern arm-chairs, shaped like sedans. Gabriel took one, I the other. They were padded deep, and exquisitely comfortable. I leaned back, gazing dreamily on my friend's face; for I wanted his features burned into my brain. He enjoyed the examination, but soon distracted me by speech.

‘It seems a hundred years since we left the town,’ he said; ‘we are in quite another world—in a realm full of romance——’

‘Gabriel,’ I interrupted, as if I had not heard his remark, ‘will you tell me the perfect truth if I ask you something?’

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘I promise seriously.’ I covered my forehead with my handkerchief. I was fain to hide my look. ‘Then,’ I said, ‘it is this: *Do you really care for my friendship?*’

‘My dear fellow,’ he cried impetuously, ‘why do you ask? I thought you knew before now. There is nobody else on earth for whom I care a thousandth part as much.’

‘Have I been of any use to you?’ I asked: unnecessarily, for I knew what his reply would be. He reiterated my words.

‘Any use to me—any use to me? Why I had sunk into a dreadful slough before I knew you. It had been a sleep of years and years, and you helped me out of it all, and made me human again. You have brought me ideal happiness in our friendship.’

I was silent a moment, then I said tentatively: ‘Suppose that I had to take a long journey—one with no chance of returning? What of your friendship then?’

His face grew very white. ‘If you take such a journey,’ he said, ‘I go with you.’

A stillness followed, so profound that I was

afraid lest the beating of my heart should attain to him and stir his sympathy. The gleaming logs on the hearth were as quiet as if the lapping flames were magical; and a dull, subtle perfume spread from the wisps of azure smoke that came winnowing down the chimney. The mantel was wonderfully wrought—a masterpiece in carven oak. Lilith, the wife of Adam, stood to the left; the Queen of Sheba, her feet on Solomon's Mirror, to the right; on the transome, clustering and grotesque, were angels and fiends. It was in accordance with my imagination—wild and fantastic, and with no unity. I bent towards Gabriel to point it out, but seeing that, drowsy with the heat, he had let his head fall back to the cushion, and was already well-nigh asleep, I strangled my remark, and began conning his face once more. What a curious forehead! It was high: not narrow, but oddly misshapen, particularly above the eyes, where the great black brows, bristling on penthouses, gave a fiercely kind look. His nose was good, his moustache coarse and with bitten ends; his lips were full and unequal; his chin was square. Here was nothing fascinating, save the fact that it was the face of my only friend.

Soon, impatient that he should sleep when I was wide awake, I rose from my chair and began walking about the room. Not daring to look at the miniature again, I turned to the opposite wall. A cry of delight burst from me, for stand-

ing there was a satin-wood spinet with open lid. I read the label of Johannes Pohlman, and the date, 1781. I had cherished from my earliest childhood the desire of playing on such an instrument, and I drew out the needleworked stool, and ran my fingers lightly over the keys in an attempt to harmonise my thoughts. To my surprise the tone was neither discordant nor decayed, but echoed with a charming tinkling. In a minor, on a numbed undercurrent of bass, a melody like a thin gold wire began its incantation. I lost myself: I was the Spirit of the Music—not the fragile fool whose life should be required of him so soon! But the vein was soon exhausted, and I turned to Gabriel to find him awake and looking at me. ‘What are you playing?’ he said eagerly. ‘I was dreaming unpleasantly, and the sound brought me to myself. I never heard anything like it’ (he passed his hand over his forehead as if perplexed): ‘it reminds me of twilight vapours in June, wind-borne across a marshy pool to die among fox-gloves and wild aniseed on the farther shore.’

‘You are right,’ I replied. ‘It is a requiem.’

Looking at my watch, I saw that it was now midnight, so I took up a candle and, lighting it at the fire, suggested sleepily that we should go to bed. Gabriel rose, and ascended the staircase at my side. The fagots in the bedroom had burnt low: only a dim red gleam was mirrored on the panelling of the landing and on the glossy door

of a clock, above whose dial a curious arrangement showed the waxing and waning of the moon. Our chamber was large, and apparently was over the supper-room. No carpet covered the worm-eaten floor; but a few discoloured skin rugs, irregularly shapen, lay about, chiefly round the cedar bedstead in the middle, whereon a volant angel, blowing a gilt bugle, leaned from the top of every post. I threw logs on the hearth, and while Gabriel undressed I lay on a couch from one of the recesses in the wall. As I rested, hot tears ran down my cheeks.

Gabriel drew aside the bed-curtains. I sprang to his side and took his hands. 'Stay,' I said gravely; 'you have not said your prayers.'

He laughed blithely. 'I never say them,' he replied. I did not relax my hold.

'For God's sake,' I muttered, 'say them to-night of all nights.'

His mirth died quickly: 'If you will sleep better with the knowledge, I will say them;' and he began to pray with a surprising beauty. I said *Amen* when all was done. In less than ten minutes he was fast asleep.

For me, I sat listening to the deathwatch sound in the region of my heart; the nearly silent drip-dropping of blood from the vessel, now well-nigh exhausted, whose emptiness means freedom. Its ticking alternated with the clock's, and each one

brought a separate vision to my fancy—visions that I had thought ripped from my heart years ago. Visions of Lenore ! O damned miniature ! But Gabriel's breathing soothed me. Once he murmured : ' Friend ! '

The gleaming of the hangings startled me. Some dull metal was interwoven with the wool, so that, as the light rose and fell, figures sprang from the folds and leaped down chasms, eyes gleamed and dimmed, arms were uplifted and struck. Soon, in my curiosity, I began to consider the chief subject, and was amazed to find it that scene in *Tamburlane*, where Bajazeth and Zabina lie with their brains dashed out. It was wrought on the side nearest the fire, and on the other (which I saw by candle-light) was an uncouth picture of the tent of Heber the Kenite, with Jael in act to use the lethal hammer. Suicide and murder, each grimly figured—suicide and murder : here were strange subjects for a temple of rest ! Yet Gabriel's dreams were happy. Often during my vigil I drew the curtain, and laid my hand tenderly on his forehead, and watched the lines of care fade out and away. As the night passed, he seemed to realise my presence : so, not wishing to break his rest, I was content to listen to the rise and fall of his breath.

The wind lulled before dawn. I looked from the window, and high above (for the opposite hill

walled out all but a narrow slit) was the sky, dark blue and nebulous. On the sill a thin-voiced bird chirped a few odd notes. Another light began contending with the gleam from the fire. A solemn grey took the place of the gloom outside—a grey that brightened and brightened.

. . . ‘Gabriel,’ I said aloud. ‘Let us see the sunrise together. Come, dress yourself! We will go to the crest of the Naze.’

He sat up in bed yawning.

‘Nay,’ he answered. ‘I am too lazy to walk far before breakfast. It is not time to get up yet. I am sleepy.’

But, seeing me fully dressed, he sprang to the floor with a bound that made things shake, and, clamouring that he was no sluggard, began to put on his clothes.

The sun rose; a long ruddy haze trembled above the hill. All the stars faded, and the glitter began to creep down the side of the valley. Streamlets were leaping in the tiny cloughs, and spreading before they reached the melancholy river into brown and white mare’s tails. Only that one bird, with the same acid piping! When we descended, breakfast had just been laid. There was nobody to wait at table; but everything you needed was there. ’Twas a still stranger meal than that of the night before. The food was impregnated with a strong flavouring, as of cinna-

mon ; the coffee smelled deliciously ; but a dish of scarlet poppies, with hearts like fingers, effused a close and sleepy perfume. We ate in silence ; and, having sat a while, I rang for the reckoning.

The woman came, as evil-looking as ever ; still wearing the amber gown. Moreover, the interest she had in me was greatly heightened, for she stood a minute gazing open-mouthed at my face, and her words were mystical. 'I trust that you have slept well here,' she said dreamily, 'for he who sleeps here needs no more sleep on earth. But this is not your last visit !' Had she seen anything in my eyes ? Was she a witch ? I turned to Gabriel, my heart panting. Thank God, he had not heard ! But when I had paid her she plucked my sleeve, and led me to a great mirror between the windows. There she pointed to the reflection of my face, which I had never seen so impassive before. I turned half-angrily away, aghast but not surprised at her familiarity (for I knew her now), and she cackled drily, with a sound that better suggested wickedness than the most insidious speech. Even Gabriel was startled, and walked quickly to the door. As we stood on the threshold, to which she followed to speed us with courtesying, I asked the nearest way to the village of Esperance, whose church, with its priest's chamber and its bells, I wished to see.

'Tis fourteen miles from here, gentlemen,' she

said. 'Pass for a good step along the river; cross at the leppings, where the water lies broadest; and when you reach the hill-top eight miles of barren moorland lie before you. The path is a Roman road, swarded and wide. Turn at the pillar with the snake-rings. Go straight through the clough to the right, and there is Esperance, with the Featherbed Moss betwixt.'

She closed the door with a loud bang, and left us standing in amaze. The guide-book showed me that the village was at most some seven miles off, and that by a straight road. But the sound of drawing bolts prevented us from asking any more: so we started for the river-side. Suddenly Gabriel turned to look at the quaint cluster of buildings. A cry burst from his lips: 'By Jove, we've come to the wrong place! This is not the Eagle—just look at the sign!' We returned. It was a long swinging hatchment, a lozenge with proper supporters, whereon was painted an ungainly mythical creature, half dog and half bird. An inscription—*Ye Gabbleratch Inne*—in faded gilt letters gleamed below. But that was not all; for through a small mullioned window to the left the old woman was peering at us, and looking over her shoulder was the face of the handsomest man I have ever seen: youthful, white, and with auburn hair: but so sinister withal that his gaze seemed as petrifying as a cockatrice's.

We turned and fled, breathless almost, but with a fleetness I should not have believed attainable to one in my condition. Ere long we turned the foot of a crag, and to our common relief passed out of sight of the inn.

'The Devil and his Dam!' quoth Gabriel, half in earnest.

The river broadened until it filled the bottom of the valley, whose walls grew more and more precipitous. Moss-covered stones, that bore the marks of ancient carving, met the path soon; and, though in places they were somewhat under water, they were distinct enough to make crossing safe. They ended at the entrance to a gorge, along whose side a path, built of clamped flags, rose sharply to a level platform. When we reached the top there lay a prospect of utter barrenness: an immense plain with an horizon of jagged peaks; a few scant patches of heather relieving the sameness of the red earth; the Roman road, with its green, velvety turf, stretching, like a stagnant canal, from where we stood to the furthest crevice in the sky-line.

A queer memory awoke in me. 'Gabriel,' I said, 'do you know the secret of this earth?' He did not: so I told him of a place, something akin to this, where, in my own childhood, the body of a girl, murdered in the first year of Queen Anne, was discovered perfectly intact and supple. The tale

pleased him. 'This is just the place I should like to be buried in,' he remarked. His words excited me. At that instant I could have done it—painfully. But I wished above all things to spare him pain.

Once I paused ; between myself and the sun a hawk was grappling with a smaller bird, whose feathers floated down like snow-flakes. My tongue formed the word 'metempsychosis' again, and Gabriel understood once more. A taint of sorrow came at the thought of our brief parting. And then I was possessed of an unutterable joy.



At mid-day he lay sleeping beside me on the moor. With my own hands I made his bed : with my own hands smoothed the sheet. Evening had fallen, when, alone and pensive, I heard the sweet bells of Saint Anne of Esperance, and saw the dim valleys of Braithwage and Camsdell with their serpentine streams.