

RODERICK'S STORY

By E. F. Benson

Only once in a hundred lifetimes is anyone privileged to see beyond the borderland of life—as was this strangely fear-free man. . . .

MY POWERS of persuasion at first seemed quite ineffectual; I could not induce my friend Roderick Cardew to strike his melancholy tent in Chelsea, and (leaving it struck) steal away like the Arabs and spend this month of spring with me at my newly acquired house at Tilling to observe the spell of April's wand making magic in the country. I seemed to have brought out all the arguments of which I was master; he had been very ill, and his doctor recommended a clearer air with as mild a climate as he could conveniently attain; he loved the great stretches of drained marsh-land which lay spread like a pool of verdure round the little town; he had not seen my new home, which made a breach in the function of hospitality, and he really could not be expected to object to his host, who, after all, was one of his oldest friends. Besides (to leave no stone unturned) as he regained his strength he could begin to play golf again, and it entailed, as he well remembered, a very mild exertion for him to keep me in my proper position in such a pursuit.

At last there was some sign of yielding.

"Yes. I should like to see the marsh and the big sky once more," he said.

A rather sinister interpretation of his words "once more," made a sudden flashed signal of alarm in my mind. It was utterly fanciful, no doubt, but that had better be extinguished first.

"Once more?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

"I always say 'once more,'" he said. "It's greedy to ask for too much."

The very fact that he fenced so ingeniously deepened my suspicion.

"That won't do," I said. "Tell me, Roddie."

He was silent a moment.

"I didn't intend to," he said, "for there can be no use in it. But if you insist, as apparently you mean to do, I may as well

give in. It's what you think; 'once more' will very likely be the most. But you mustn't fuss about it; I'm not going to. No proper person fusses about death; that's a train which we are all sure to catch. It always waits for you."

I have noticed that when one learns tidings of that sort, one feels, almost immediately, that one had known them a long time. I felt so now.

"Go on," I said.

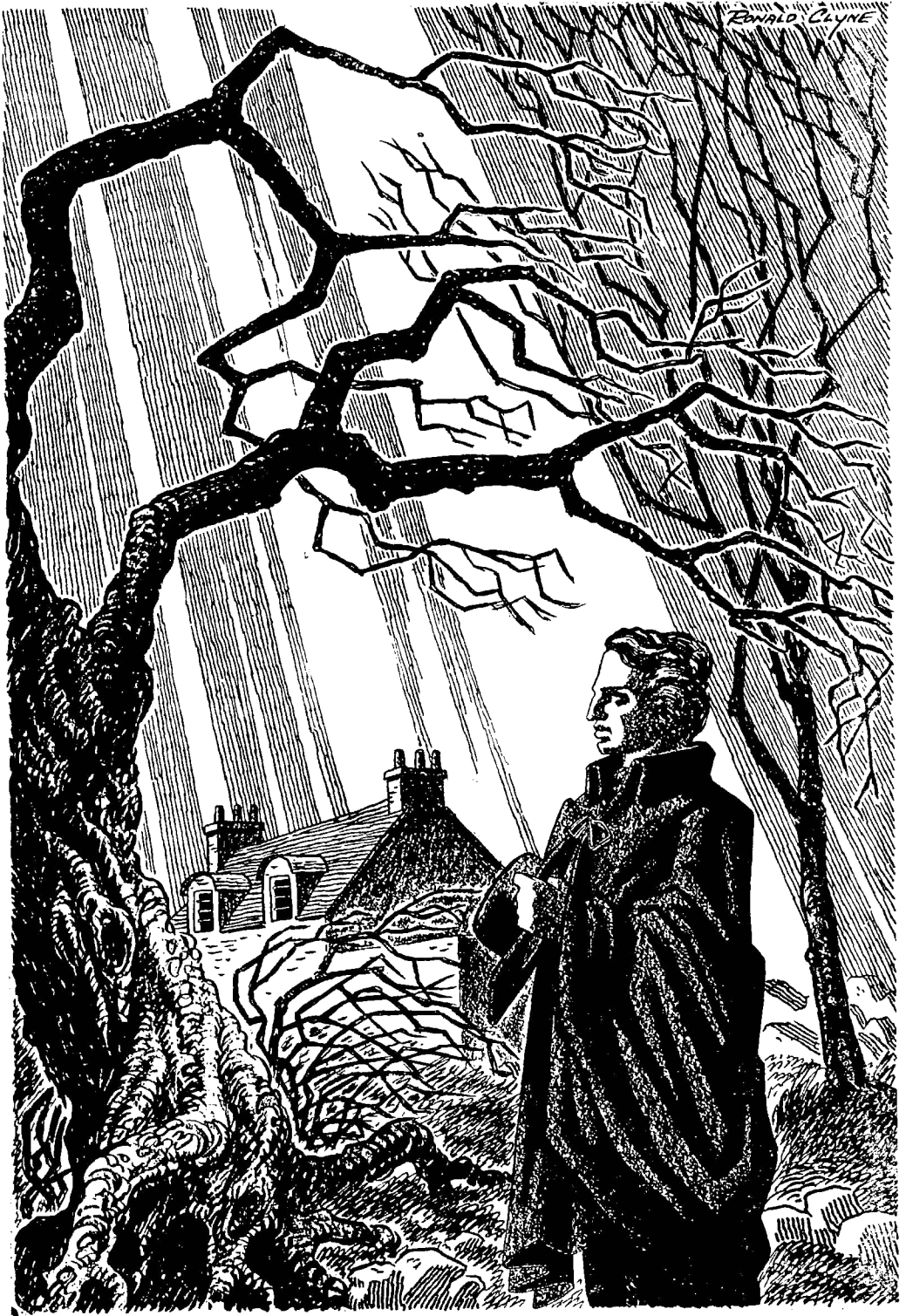
"Well, that's about all there is. I've had sentence of death passed upon me, and it will probably be carried out, I'm delighted to say, in the French fashion. In France, you know, they don't tell you when you are to be executed till a few minutes before. It is likely that I shall have even less than that, so my doctor informs me. A second or two will be all I shall get. Congratulate me, please."

I thought it over for a moment.

"Yes, heartily," I said. "I want to know a little more though."

"Well, my heart's all wrong, quite un-mendably so. Heart-disease! Doesn't it sound romantic? In mid-Victorian romance, heroes and heroines alone die of heart-disease. But that's by the way. The fact is that I may die at any time without a moment's warning. I shall give a couple of gasps, so he told me when I insisted on knowing details, and that'll be all. Now, perhaps, you understand why I was unwilling to come and stay with you. I don't want to die in your house; I think it's dreadfully bad manners to die in other people's houses. I long to see Tilling again, but I think I shall go to an hotel. Hotels are fair game, for the management over-charges those who live there to compensate themselves for those who die there. But it would be rude of me to die in your house; it might entail a lot of bother for you, and I couldn't apologize—"

"But I don't mind your dying in my house. At least you see what I mean—"



He laughed.

"I do, indeed," he said. "And you couldn't give a warmer assurance of friendship. But I couldn't come and stay with you in my present plight without telling you what it was, and yet I didn't mean to tell you. But there we are now. Think again; reconsider your decision."

"I won't," I said. "Come and die in my house by all means, if you've got to. I would much sooner you lived there: your dying will in any case annoy me immensely. But it would annoy me more to know that you had done it in some beastly hotel among plush and looking-glasses. You shall have any bedroom you like. And I want you dreadfully to see my house, which is adorable. . . . Oh, Roddie, what a bore it all is!"

It was impossible to speak or to think differently. I knew well how trivial a matter death was to my friend, and I was not sure that at heart I did not agree with him. We were quite at one, too, in that we had so often gossiped about death with cheerful conjecture and interested surmise based on the steady assurance that something of new and delightful import was to follow, since neither of us happened to be of that melancholy cast of mind that can envisage annihilation. I had promised, in case I was the first to embark on the great adventure, to do my best to "get through," and give him some irrefutable proof of the continuance of my existence, just by way of endorsement of our belief, and he had given a similar pledge, for it appeared to us both that, whatever the conditions of the future might turn out to be, it would be impossible when lately translated there, not to be still greatly concerned with what the present world still held for us in ties of love and affection. I laughed now to remember how he had once imagined himself begging to be excused for a few minutes, directly after death, and saying to St. Peter: "May I keep your Holiness waiting for a minute before you finally lock me into Heaven or Hell with those beautiful keys? I won't be a minute, but I do want so much to be a ghost, and appear to a friend of mine who is on the look-out for such a visit. If I find I can't make myself visible I will come back at once. . . . Oh, *thank* you, your Holiness."

SO WE agreed that I should run the risk of his dying in my house, and promised not to make any reproaches posthumously (as far as he was concerned)

in case he did so. He on his side promised not to die if he could possibly help it, and next week or so he would come down to me in the heart of the country that he loved, and see April at work.

"And I haven't told you anything about my house yet," I said. "It's right at the top of the hill, square and Georgian and red-bricked. A panelled hall, dining-room and panelled sitting-room downstairs, and more panelled rooms upstairs. And there's a garden with a lawn, and a high brick wall round it, and there is a big garden-room, full of books, with a bow-window looking down the cobbled street. Which bedroom will you have? Do you like looking on to the garden or on to the street? You may even have my room if you like."

He looked at me a moment with eager attention. "I'll have the square panelled bedroom that looks out on to the garden, please," he said. "It's the second door on the right when you stand at the top of the stairs."

"But how do you know about that?" I asked.

"Because I've been in the house before, once only, three years ago," he said. "Margaret Alton took it furnished for a couple of years or so. She died there, and I was with her. And if I had known that this was your house, I should never have dreamed of hesitating whether I should accept your invitation. I should have thrown my good manners about not dying in other people's houses to the winds. But the moment you began to describe the garden and garden-room I knew what house it was. I have always longed to go there again. When may I come, please? Next week is too far ahead. You're off there this afternoon, aren't you?"

I rose: the clock warned me that it was time for me to go to the station.

"Yes. Come this afternoon," I suggested. "Come with me."

"I wish I could, but I take that to mean that it will suit you if I come to-morrow. For I certainly will. Good Lord! To think of your having got just that house! It ought to be a wonderfully happy one, for I saw—but I'll tell you about that perhaps when I'm there. But don't ask me to: I'll tell you if and when I can, as the lawyers say. Are you really off?"

I was really off, for I had no time to spare, but before I got to the door he spoke again.

"Of course, the room I have chosen was *the* room," he said, and now there was no

need for me to ask what he meant by *the* room.

I knew no more than the barest and most public outline of that affair, distant now by the space of many years, but, so I conceived, ever green in Roderick's heart, and, as my train threaded its way through the gleams of this translucent spring evening, I retraced this outline as far as I knew it. It was the one thing of which Roderick never spoke (even now he was not sure that he could manage to tell me the end of it), and I had to rummage in my memory for the reconstruction of the half-obliterated lines.

Margaret—her maiden name would not be conjured back into memory—had been an extremely beautiful girl when Roderick first met her, and, not without encouragement, he had fallen head over ears in love with her. All seemed to be going well with his wooing, he had the air of a happy lover, when there appeared on the scene that handsome and outrageous fellow, Richard Alton. He was the heir to his uncle's barony and his really vast estates, and the girl, when he proceeded to lay siege, very soon capitulated. She may have fallen in love with him, for he was an attractive scamp, but the verdict at the time was that it was her ambition, not her heart, that she indulged. In any case, there was the end of Roderick's wooing, and before the year was out she had married the other.

I remembered seeing her once or twice in London about this time, splendid and brilliant, of a beauty that dazzled, with the world very much at her feet. She bore him two sons; she succeeded to a great position; and then with the granting of her heart's desire, the leanness withal followed. Her husband's escapades were now numerous and notorious; he treated her with a subtle cruelty that just kept on the right side of the law, and, finally, seeking his freedom, he deserted her. Whether it was pride that kept her from divorcing him, or whether she still loved him (if she had ever done so) and was ready to take him back, or whether it was out of revenge that she refused to have done with him legally, was an affair of which I knew nothing. Calamity followed on calamity; first one and then the other of her sons was killed in the European War, and I remembered having heard that she was the victim of some malignant and disfiguring disease, which caused her to lead a hermit life, seeing nobody. It was now three years or so since she had died.

SUCH, with the addition that she had died in my house, and that Roderick had been with her, was the sum of my meagre knowledge, which might or might not, so he had intimated, be supplemented by him. He arrived next day, having motored down from London for the avoidance of fatigue, and certainly as we sat after dinner that night in the garden-room, he had avoided it very carefully, for never had I seen him more animated.

"Oh, I have been so right to come here," he said, "for I feel steeped in tranquillity and content. There's such a tremendous sense of Margaret's presence here, and I never knew how much I wanted it. Perhaps that is purely subjective, but does that matter so long as I feel it? How a scene soaks into the place where it has been enacted; my room, which you know was her room, is alive with her. I want nothing better than to be here, prowling and purring over the memory of the last time, which was the only one, that I was here. Yes, just that; and I know how odd you must think it. But it's true; it was here that I saw her die, and instead of shunning the place, I bathe myself in it. For it was one of the happiest hours of my life."

"Because—" I began.

"No; not because it gave her release, if that's in your mind," he said. "It's because I saw—"

He broke off, and remembering his stipulation that I should ask him nothing, but that he would tell me "if and when" he could, I put no question to him. His eyes were dancing with the sparkle of the fire burning on the hearth, for though April was here, the evenings were still chilly, and it was not the fire that gave them their light, but a joyousness that was as bright as glee, and as deep as happiness.

"No, I'm not going on with that now," he said, "though I expect I shall before my days are out. At present I shall leave you wondering why a place that should hold such mournful memories for me, is such a well-spring. And as I am not for telling you about me, let me enquire about you. Bring yourself up to date; what have you been doing, and much more important, what have you been thinking about?"

"My doings have chiefly been confined to settling into this house," I said. "I've been pulling and pushing furniture into places where it wouldn't go, and cursing it."

He looked round the room.

"It doesn't seem to bear you any grudge," he said. "It looks contented. And what else?"

"In the intervals, when I couldn't push and curse any more," I said, "I've been writing a few spook stories. All about the borderland, which I love as much as you do."

He laughed outright.

"Do you, indeed?" he said. "Then it's no use my saying that it is quite impossible. But I should like to know your views on the borderland."

I pointed to a sheaf of typewritten stuff that littered my table.

"Them's my sentiments," I said, "and quite at your service."

"Good; then I'll take them to bed with me when I go, if you'll allow me. I've always thought that you had a pretty notion of the creepy, but the mistake that you make is to imagine that creepiness is characteristic of the borderland. No doubt there are creepy things there, but so there are everywhere, and a thunder-storm is far more terrifying than an apparition. And when you get really close to the borderland, you see how enchanting it is, and how vastly more enchanting the other side must be. I got right on to the borderland once, here in this house, as I shall probably tell you, and I never saw so happy and kindly a place. And without doubt I shall soon be careering across it in my own person. That'll be, as we've often determined, wildly interesting, and it will have the solemnity of a first night at a new play about it. There'll be the curtain close in front of you, and presently it will be raised, and you will see something you never saw before. How well, on the whole, the secret has been kept, though from time to time little bits of information, little scraps of dialogue, little descriptions of scenery have leaked out. Enthrallingly interesting; one wonders how they will come into the great new drama."

"You don't mean the sort of thing that mediums tell me?" I asked.

"Of course I don't. I hate the sloshy—really there's no other word for it, and why should there be, since that word fits so admirably—the sloshy utterances of the ordinary high-class, beyond-suspicion medium at half a guinea a sitting, who asks if there's anybody present who once knew a Charles, or if not Charles, Thomas or William. Naturally somebody has known a Charles, Thomas or William who has passed over, and is the son, brother, father or cousin of a lady in black. So when she

claims Thomas, he tells her that he is very busy and happy, helping people. . . . O Lord, what rot! I went to one such séance a month ago, just before I was taken ill, and the medium said that Margaret wanted to get into touch with somebody. Two of us claimed Margaret, but Margaret chose me and said she was the spirit of my wife. Wife, you know! You must allow that this was a very unfortunate shot. When I said that I was unmarried, Margaret said that she was my mother, whose name was Charlotte. Oh dear, oh dear! Well, I shall go to bed with joy, bringing your spooks with me. . . ."

"Sheaves," said I.

"Yes, but aren't they the sheaves? Isn't one's gleanings of sheaves in this world what they call spooks? That is, the knowledge of what one takes across?"

"I don't understand one word," said I.

"But you must understand. All the knowledge—worth anything—which you or I have collected here, is the beginning of the other life. We toll and moil, and make our gleanings and our harvestings, and all our decent efforts help us to realize what the real harvest is. Surely we shall take with us exactly that which we have reaped. . . ."

After he had gone to bed I sat trying to correct the errors of a typist, but still between me and the pages there dwelt that haunting sense of all that we did here being only the grist of what was to come. Our achievements were rewarded, so he seemed to say, by a glimpse. And those glimpses—so I tried to follow him—were the hints that had leaked out of the drama for which the curtain was twitching. Was that it?

RODERICK came down to breakfast next morning, superlatively happy.

"I didn't read a single line of your stories," he said. "When I got into my bedroom I was so immeasurably content that I couldn't risk getting interested in anything else. I lay awake a long time, pinching myself in order to prolong my sheer happiness, but the flesh was weak, and at last, from sheer happiness, I slept and probably snored. Did you hear me? I hope not. And then sheer happiness dictated my dreams, though I don't know what they were, and the moment I was called I got up, because. . . . Because I didn't want to miss anything. Now, to be practical again, what are you doing this morning?"

"I was intending to play golf," I said, "unless—"

"There isn't an 'unless,' if you mean me. My plan made itself for me, and I intend—this is my plan—to drive out with you, and sit in the hollow by the fourth tee, and read your stories there. There's a great southwesterly wind, like a celestial house-maid, scouring the skies, and I shall be completely sheltered there, and in the intervals of my reading, I shall pleasantly observe the unsuccessful efforts of the golfers to carry the big bunker. I can't personally play golf any more, but I shall enjoy seeing other people attempting to do it."

"And no prowling or purring?" I asked.

"Not this morning. That's all right: it's there. It's so much all right that I want to be active in other directions. Sitting in a windless hollow is about the range of my activities. I say that for fear that you should."

I found a match when we arrived at the clubhouse, and Roderick strolled away to the goal of his observations. Half an hour afterwards I found him watching with criminally ecstatic joy the soaring drives that, in the teeth of the great wind, were arrested and blown back into the unholiest bunker in all the world or the low clever balls that never rose to the height of the shored-up cliff of sand. The couple in front of my partner and me were sarcastic dogs, and bade us wait only till they had delved themselves over the ridge, and then we might follow as soon as we chose. After violent deeds in the bunker they climbed over the big dune, thirty yards beyond which lay the green on which they would now be putting.

As soon as they had disappeared, Roderick snatched my driver from my hand.

"I can't bear it," he said. "I must hit a ball again. Tee it low, caddie. . . . No, no tee at all."

He hit a superb shot, just high enough to carry the ridge, and not so high that it caught the opposing wind and was stopped towards the end of its flight. He gave a loud croak of laughter.

"That'll teach them not to insult my friend," he said. "It must have been pitched right among their careful puttings. And now I shall go and read his ghost-stories."

I have recorded this athletic incident because better than any analysis of his attitude towards life and death it conveys just what that attitude was. He knew perfectly well that any swift exertion might be fatal to him, but he wanted to hit a golf ball again as sweetly and as hard as it could

be hit. He had done it: he had scored off death. And as I went on my way I felt perfectly confident that if, with that brisk free effort, he had fallen dead on the tee, he would have thought it well worth while, provided only that he had made that irreproachable shot.

THE stories which Roderick had taken to read were designed to be of an uncomfortable type: one concerned a vampire, one an elemental, the third the re-incarnation of a certain execrable personage, and as we sat in the garden-room after tea, he with these pages on his knees, I had the pleasure of seeing him give hasty glances round, as he read, as if to assure himself that there was nothing unusual in the dimmer corners of the room. . . . I liked that; he was doing as I intended that a reader should.

Before long he came to the last page.

"And are you intending to make a book of them?" he asked. "What are the other stories like?"

"Worse," said I, with the complacency of the horror-monger.

"Then—did you ask for criticism? I shall give it in any case—you will make a book that not only is inartistic, all shadows and no light, but a false book. Fiction can be false, you know, inherently false. You play godfather to your stories, you see: you tell them in the first person, those at least that I have read, and that, though it need not be supposed that those experiences were actually yours, yet gives a sort of guarantee that you believe the borderland of which you write to be entirely terrible. But it isn't: there are probably terrors there—I think for instance that I believe in elemental spirits, of some ghastly kind—but I am sure that I believe that the borderland, for the most part, is almost inconceivably delightful. I've got the best of reasons for believing that."

"I'm willing to be convinced," said I.

Again, as he looked at the fire, his eye sparkled, not with the reflected flame, but with the brightness of some interior vision.

"Well, there's an hour yet before dinner," he said, "and my story won't take half of that. It's about my previous experience of this house; what I saw, in fact, in the room which I now occupy. It was because of that, naturally, that I wanted the same room again. Here goes, then.

"For the twenty years of Margaret's married life," he said, "I never saw her except quite accidentally and casually. Cas-

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ually, like that, I had seen her at theatres and what not with her two boys whom thus I knew by sight. But I had never spoken to either of them, nor, after her marriage, to their mother. I knew, as all the world knew, that she had a terrible life, but circumstances being what they were, I could not bring myself to her notice, the more so because she made no sign or gesture of wanting me. But I am sure that no day passed on which I did not long to be able to show her that my love and sympathy were hers.

"I heard, of course, of the death of her sons. They were both killed in France within a few days of each other; one was eighteen, the other nineteen. I wrote to her then formally, so long had we been strangers, and she answered formally. After that, she took this house, where she lived alone. A year later, I was told that she had now for some months been suffering from a malignant and disfiguring disease.

"I was in London, strolling down Piccadilly when my companion mentioned it, and I at once became aware that I must go to see her, not tomorrow or soon, but now.

“A FEW hours later I was at your door here, asked to see her, and was told that she was desperately ill and could see nobody. But I got her maid to take the message that I was here, and presently her nurse came down to tell me that she would see me. I should find Margaret, she said, wearing a veil so as to conceal from me the dreadful ravages which the disease had inflicted on her face, and the scars of the two operations which she had undergone. Very likely she would not speak to me, for she had great difficulty in speaking at all, and in any case I was not to stay for more than a few minutes. Probably she could not live many hours: I had only just come in time. And at that moment I wished I had done anything rather than come here, for though instinct had driven me here, yet instinct now recoiled with unspeakable horror. The flesh wars against the spirit, you know, and under its stress I now suggested that it was better perhaps that I should not see her. . . . But the nurse merely said again that Margaret wished to see me.

"I went in alone; Margaret was propped up in bed with pillows, so that she sat nearly upright, and over her head was a dark veil through which I could see noth-

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ing whatever. Her right hand lay on the coverlet, and as I seated myself by her bedside, where the nurse had put a chair for me, Margaret advanced her hand towards me, shyly, hesitatingly.

He paused, his face beaming and radiant with the light of that memory.

"I am speaking of things unspeakable," he said. "I can no more convey to you all that meant than by a mere enumeration of colours can I steep your soul in the feeling of a sunset. . . . So there I sat, with her hand covered and clasped in mine. I had been told that very likely she would not speak, and for myself there was no word which would not be dross in the gold of that silence. And then from behind her veil there came a whisper.

"'I couldn't die without seeing you,' she said. 'I was sure you would come. I've one thing to say to you. I loved you, and I tried to choke my love. And for years, my dear, I have been reaping the harvest of what I did. I tried to kill love, but it was so much stronger than I. And now the harvest is gathered. I have suffered cruelly, you know, but I bless every pang of it. I needed it all. . . .'

"Only a few minutes before, I had quaked at the thought of seeing her. But now I could not suffer that the veil should cover her face.

"'Put up your veil, darling,' I said. 'I must see you.'

"'No, no,' she whispered. 'I should horrify you. I am terrible.'

"'You can't be terrible to me,' I said. 'I am going to lift it.'

"I raised her veil. And what did I see? I might have known, I think; I might have guessed that at this moment, supreme and perfect, I should see with vision.

"There was no scar or ravage of disease or disfigurement there. She was far lovelier than she had ever been, and on her face there shone the dawn of the everlasting day. She had shed all that was perishable and subject to decay, and her immortal spirit was manifested to me, purged and punished if you will, but humble and holy. There was granted to my frail mortal sight the power of seeing truly, it was permitted to me to be with her beyond the bounds of mortality. . . .

"And then, even as I was lost in an amazement of love and wonder, I saw we were not alone in the room. Two boys, whom I recognized, were standing at the other side of the bed, looking at her. It

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seemed utterly natural that they should be there.

"'We've been allowed to come to you, mother darling,' said one. 'Get up.'

"She turned her face to them.

"'Ah, my dears,' she said. 'How lovely of you. But just one moment.'

"She bent over towards me and kissed me.

"'Thank you for coming, Roderick,' she said. 'Good-bye, just for a little while.'

"At that my power of sight—my power of true sight—failed. Her head fell back on the pillows and turned over on one side. For one second, before I let the veil drop over it again, I had a glimpse of her face, marred and cruelly mutilated. I saw that, I say, but never then nor afterwards could I remember it. It was like a terrible dream, which utterly fades on the awaking. Then her hand, which had been clasping mine, in that moment of her farewell slackened its hold, and dropped on to the bed. She had just moved away, somewhere out of sight, with her two boys to look after her."

He paused.

"That's all," he said. "And do you wonder that I chose that room? How I hope that she will come for me."

MY ROOM was next to Roderick's, the head of his bed being just opposite the head of mine on the other side of the wall. That night I had undressed, lain down, and had just put out my light, when I heard a sharp tap above me. I thought it was some fortuitous noise, as of a picture swinging in a draught, but the moment after it was repeated, and it struck me that it was perhaps a summons from Roderick who wanted something. Still quite unalarmed, I got out of bed, and, candle in hand, went to his door. I knocked, but receiving no answer, opened it an inch or two.

"Did you want anything?" I asked, and, again receiving no answer, I went in.

His lights were burning, and he was sitting up in bed. He did not appear to see me or be conscious of my presence, and his eyes were fixed on some point a few feet away in front of him. His mouth smiled, and in his eyes was just such a joy as I had seen there when he told me his story. Then, leaning on his arm, he moved as if to rise.

"Oh, Margaret, my dear. . . ."

He drew a couple of short breaths, and fell back.