In the Age of Obsession

Ivor E. Cooper

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Abstract

IN THE AGE OF OBSESSION

by

Ivor E. Cooper

In Writing *In the Age of Obsession* the author has attempted to create a novel which examines a number of important issues. By writing the narrative in the first person he has been able to pursue these themes through the development of Daniel Rackham, the main character.

The author chose the late nineteenth century as the setting because the period was one of dynamic and often revolutionary change. Within such a time period as this, when an old era is passing away and a new era is beginning, we are able to witness phenomena which can only be precipitated by such extraordinary circumstances. The religious, social, political and industrial revolutions of this period provide a perfect setting in which to examine issues which confront all eras.

Through the character of Daniel Rackham and his interaction with the other characters, the author tries to examine the forces which drive men to their often unfortunate end.
The author attempts to examine the nature and role of the human soul. He follows the descending path of those who try to rid themselves of the restrictions that conscience puts on the individual. He also maps out the course and final results of the actions of men and women who are ruled by obsessive needs.

Through the character of Daniel Rackham the author seeks to show a journey from innocence to experience. It is not the unintended journey of an unfortunate bystander. Rather it portrays a character who, perhaps misguidedly, seeks to lose his soul and thus fit himself for a life guiltless pleasure.

In researching the novel the author has read widely in nineteenth century literature and attempted to encapsulate the spirit of the age. The locations, scenes, and action are all considered, by the author, to be an accurate reflection of the times.
IN THE AGE OF OBSESSION
by
Ivor Cooper

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts
in English

June 1985
Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this thesis in his/her opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree Master of Arts.

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INTRODUCTION

The year is 1895, and London is hanging onto the grandeur of the nineteenth century with a tenacity which is both exciting and at times alarming. Daniel Rackham, a handsome young socialite, is thrown headlong into the world of decadent extravagance by the inheritance he will receive on his 25th birthday and by his new-found acquaintance with the notorious and shameless artist, Acton Lister.

In the roles of student and master, Daniel Rackham and Acton Lister begin a journey which they both believe will rid Daniel of his soul and thus fit him for the perfect life of hedonism. The education does not go according to plan, as neither character has anticipated the arrival of Alicia LaFelice.

She is a breathtaking creature whose dark secrets do little to prevent Daniel and Acton becoming victims of their obsessions. Even though Alicia knows the end, she can do nothing to prevent the bitter struggle which
condemns all three protagonists to a world of endless torment.

In the Age of Obsession is a story which deals with the plight of the human soul in a time when the rich squandered their wealth and their very lives at a pace which reduced the participants to an endless search for perfect pleasure. Daniel Rackham is innocent of the dangers of such pursuit and eagerly sits at the feet of his new-found mentor. Acton Lister is a man who claims to have successfully removed his soul from its body and now he wishes the same for Daniel. Neither character is able to live with their theories when faced by the perfect form of Alicia LaFelice. Her past dictates her future, and she knows that neither Daniel nor Acton can have what they desire.

Acton Lister's painting of Alicia becomes his obsession and reawakens his soul to the torment of its needs. Daniel's passion for Alicia is frustrated by his inability to convince her of its worth. Alicia is haunted by the spectre of the past. She is powerless to change the present or the future and sits in wait until the inevitable occurs.
CHAPTER ONE

It was a cold February afternoon, and the drizzle fell with relentless ease. It seemed as though the day were trying to cancel itself. I trudged along the empty street as though charmed by a snake. Within a few hundred yards, I began to make out the shape of the house. Through the dull glint of the falling rain, it seemed like some huge capo-di-monte sculpture; its great white palladian portals gleamed even in the gray haze.

Approaching the long marble entrance steps, I began to ponder the nature of the man within the house. I sprung the brass entrance chain and heard the delayed clatter of bells. Soon the whispering steps of antique servants echoed around the house. A long moment later the great door slid noiselessly open.

As if anticipating my unaccountable reticence, the rather austere, dark-suited butler gestured me to cross the threshold. As I did so, I stared absently around, failing to absorb anything I saw. Further more concerted observations revealed a decorous though tasteful large, high-ceilinged cavern of an
entrance. It seemed altogether as large as the full extent of my entire lodgings.

"Perhaps, sir, I might take your hat and coat." I realized that the butler had been eyeing me in a rather bemused way as I stood dripping the rain of London onto the handprinted Italian floor tiles. No doubt he was deeply moved by my efforts to walk in such weather rather than take a cab.

"It's good for the complexion," I muttered, not being sure whether he had enquired of my means of conveyance.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he answered somewhat confusedly.

"The rain, my dear fellow. It's good for the complexion. You should try it yourself." I began to feel rather foolish and wished that the servant would go away. Presently he did, and I was left in silent reverie. It was soon broken by the sound of a door being closed. As my eyes edged up the long, wide, arching stairway at the furthest end of the hallway, the sound of confident steps grew louder.

"Ah, my dear Daniel, how charming. You're pleasantly early." The words slipped with casual luxuriance from Acton Lister. He stood above me, halfway down the flight of curling steps. One hand rested almost unintentionally on the bannister while the other caressed his graying hair. His large, bulky, though clearly defined features seemed oddly placed in an oriental smoking jacket.

His unintended ease displaced my own confidence and left
me bleakly perusing his reputation. At 25, the hogs hair brushes and tightened canvass turned on the anvil of his skill had made him a legend, and there he stood 18 years later basking in the acclaim he'd won.

"Well, dear Daniel, don't stand there wasting our all-too-brief moments. Pray share what tantalizing gossip you have." As always, Lister was more interested in hearing what people had said of him when he wasn't there than asking their opinions when he was.

"I have come as we arranged. You sent a message with your servant, you may remember." Acton Lister smiled widely at my unintended stiffness.

"Ah, yes indeed. You are to be laid bare before the ultimate judge, the artist." Had I known less, or indeed more, of this man than our mutual past allowed, I would not, perhaps, have felt so sharply divided in my feelings for his being.

Whilst I was still contemplating my feelings for Acton Lister, he waved me up the tumbling flight of stairs. I followed, watching his strangely gentle steps.

"My God, Daniel," he said quite suddenly, stopping and nearly causing me to trip over him. "Why is it that no one ever talks about me anymore?"

I attempted to assure him that he was, as ever, a subject of after-dinner conversation in all the best households.
Why, even last week I remembered Lady Stanstead singing the praises of Lister's latest landscape.

"No, no. Daniel, that is not talk, that is chit-chat. Talk is serious, talk is wounding gossip. Chit-chat is simply—well, how shall I say? — it's just meaningless chatter about one's career or new house."

We reached the top of the stairs and walked along a lengthy oak-panelled passage.

"Perhaps," I said, gaining confidence and trying to be truthful, "it is because you no longer outrage with either your painting or your life."

"My dear boy," he exploded, "don't talk nonsense. Why, only last week some miserable waif that begged me to use her as a model threatened to kill herself if I didn't marry her."

"Alas," I replied, "I fear the antics of an artist and his model are rather passé around the table of Lady Barton."

Lister laughed raucously and turned the handle of the studio door.

"You, Daniel, are becoming a perfect wag. Perhaps your education is almost too complete."

Before I could respond, we entered the artist's den. Instantaneously, the power of the room swept over me. Its sensual walls smothered my personality, and I felt absorbed by its force. This sublime retreat seemed oddly awry in
the strict order of the rest of the dwelling. How little a passerby would know of the place entombed within the cold, white walls of the exterior. Its presence was belied by all that lay without. A rapid sense of ease rode over me, and I dropped down onto a large billowing couch which filled one entire corner of the room.

"There are, of course," the artist said, as if he were halfway through a silent conversation, "other things in life than being decried, slandered, and generally being torn sin by sin to pieces by one's closest friends."

"Yes sir, indeed. Surely truth for the artist is recompense for all the frustrations and lack of acceptance he may find in life." The naivety and inappropriateness of my comment hit me exactly at the same time as Lister's explosion of laughter shattered the calm.

"My dear boy, painting is like politics: one is paid to lie about life."

"Bravo!" I shouted, being only too glad he had let me off so lightly for my faux pas. "Such as what?" I asked, returning to his original comment about life.

"Well, beauty, of course, my dear boy."

"Beauty?" I asked, wondering where I was being led.

"Yes, beauty." He paused longer than a pause should be.

"Do forgive my failure to perceive the light, but what exactly do you mean?" I questioned.
"Allow me to pour forth the heavenly rays," he mused. "Take this poor meager attempt at representation." He pointed to a large canvass which had across it stretched surface a rather vulgar, sentimentally portrayed figure which could by all accounts be described as an overweight, somewhat aged streetwalker.

Lister eyed my obvious doubts, and a sardonic glint passed across his ample brow. "I see, poor boy, that you are alarmed at my choice of example."

"Well, I merely thought..." I protested.

"Indeed you did. Bravo! We are agreed on what is not found within the delicate word beauty. Where then shall we look?" His toying ceased for a moment as he passed me a cigarette from a rather unpleasant silver case. Across its lid and sides there wreathed some unfortunate voluptuous Botticelli figure whose gross misrepresentation had turned the sensuous into tortured agony. Lister lit our cigarettes. A large plume of smoke shrouded his form and released a gentle though heavy scent which lulled my thoughts and trapped my unescaped words.

Where then shall we look? His words echoed around my head and then slipped away from each other and faded gently in the smoke of my own cigarette.

"I shall answer for you then, as your reverie does not allow you to speak for yourself."
I listened intently while waiting for some undetermined answer. Instead of addressing me, he moved across the dark Persian rugs and peered out of the misted studio window. It faced out onto the lush, green, dripping garden. He seemed intent on some detail of which I was unaware. He stood motionless except for the occasional puff of smoke which softly diffused his large rounded shoulders. He framed the portal, letting only a shadowy grey light fill the chamber.

I glanced around the room, judging it under its new mantle of grey. Its chaotic jumble of artifacts and casually placed canvasses had a peculiar sense of conflict. Dark, inscrutable Indian goddesses stood on delicate Japanese ivory inlaid tables. African death masks stood sentinel over a chaise longue which was draped with printed Chinese silk. It was in all a mysterious boudoir which filled me with the most strange emotions.

The distant but distinct chimes of a drawing room clock struck four o'clock. Already the eye of day was beginning to close. I returned to the dark unspeaking silhouette standing by the window. It filled me with a sudden uncontrollable feeling of pain; pain remembered, not presently felt. To ward it away, I broke the smoke-filled silence.

"Acton, your silence does not become one with so much to say. Speak forth and pass truth from lips to ears."
He turned slowly, almost imperceptibly, and faced me. His face seemed strangely ashen, and his otherwise heavy, thickset features seemed lean and hollow as if he'd seen some terrible vision.

"Take yourself," he expostulated, somewhat more lightly than his visage bespoke. "You are a beauty of the moment from which I shall make a beauty of eternity." His face grew fiery with the annunciation. As if the energy were too much for him, he sat down on the chaise longue and contemplated the ceiling.

Ah, yes. I had almost forgotten the purpose of my visit. "So when shall we begin?" I asked hurriedly.

"Patience, Daniel. We cannot see all that is necessary immediately. Besides, we make such adequate companions, do we not?" His answer reminded me of our juxtaposition. Resentment welled in my breast as I felt the power of his control.

"Lister, why do you wish to paint me?"

He caught my sense of fear.

"Because, simply because you will become greater than you already are. My canvass will etch your life and engrave it indelibly."

Without warning, he pulled a sash of tapestry silk which hung by the nearest wall. Immediately, I heard the faint tinkle of bells in the servants quarters.
"It's time for tea. We have spent too much time in bohemian meanderings. It is the influence of the decor, I think. And now it's time to be English, to be practical and take tea."

My admiration for Acton Lister soared as I pondered his quick turn of tone. Here was a man whose spell moved from place to place, touching new parts of the mind every second.

The solace of the den was breached by an intruder. The butler drew in behind him the hard air of the outside. It shook the pleasures of the studio, and they were almost lost. After an interminable time and the transmission of various messages from servant to master, the butler left.

We took our tea and talked of things considerably smaller than the previous silence allowed for. We discussed the opera which reminded me of my appointment at 8:30 that same evening. Acton asked, out of courtesy, I felt, how I found my new lodgings, to which I replied that they were adequate until I reached 25 and received my legacy. He, like most who were acquainted with the terms of my legacy, was most vociferous on the subject.

"Daniel, one must seriously question the sanity of your poor, deceased relative in allowing unscrupulous lawyers to dictate your poverty. For all they know or care, you could starve to death or, more unfortunately, not be seen regularly at the club before you reach your crock of gold. Still, I
suspect that your venerable uncle was concerned for your soul and felt that poverty would ensure its existence. He seemed to forget, however, that the soul is of little use without a body to hold it down. Indeed, one may argue that it is better to have a body and no soul at all rather than destroy the body through poverty in order to ensure the continued existence of the soul."

I reminded Acton Lister that I had little more than six months until my 25th birthday and that I would have plenty of time to lose my soul after that. He was not convinced.

"Losing one's soul is not easy. Many have tried and have simply ended up being philanthropists, after-dinner bores, or both. The pursuit of sin is a serious, and by no means easy, vocation.

"I fail to see how money will enable me to sin more effectively," I countered.

"That, dear boy, is because you don't have any money, and you spend most of your day walking around London in the rain catching colds. People who have colds rarely do anything but sneeze. Sneezing is not easily assimilated into a program of concerted sinning. You will find that the easiest way to lose your soul is through excess money and insufficient occupation."

"You, Acton, would I suppose set yourself up as a paradigm for the sinner?" I asked, trying to draw him into a trap.
"In some ways, I do see myself as a sort of model upon which many of the more meritable aspects of sin could be built," he said self-assuredly.

"At last. I have you by your own admission. You said that in order to lose one's soul, one's occupation must be inversely proportional to one's wealth."

Lister laughed somewhat patronizingly and answered, "Like all exuberant youth, you prepare your trap with rusted wire. I did, as you might care to remember, say that this was the easiest way to sin; however, I have never found total lethargy to be very enduring as it tends to kill the spirit in which sin is formed. Therefore, I chose the noble art of painting in order to fling my soul from its carcass. Art is a sin by nature. Its sin is in its practice, and every brushstroke counts as a sin against the soul. It is a perfect way of sinning. First, the artist steals from the sitter, then he lies about what he has stolen, then finally he murders the spirit of creation by fraudulently selling it off to the highest gullible bidder."

Acton Lister finished his diatribe, rose from the chaise longue and turned on the amber glow of the gas light. It still wasn't dark outside, but the row of tall poplars across the garden began to look like thin dark reeds quivering in the breeze. The gas flame shot lurid shapes around the room as it tried to establish itself on the mantle.
I felt irritated with Lister's last comment and wanted to leave. Instead I reined in my frustrations and challenged him: "If you have such a tawdry view of painting, why do you insult me by wishing to paint my portrait?"

He eyed me intently and then smiled.

"There is a sin involved in my painting you, it's true. But it is not one of the aforementioned deliberate, cynical sins. It is far more earnest. With my proposal to paint you, the sin will lie in my inability to do justice to your beauty. It is a sin all the same, but not one I commit by choice. The sin lies in my lack of skill and my lack of genius."

"Come now," I hastily replied, "your skill is unmatched in all of London."

He sighed deeply and continued: "Correction, dear boy, there is none who had my skill 20 years ago. Today it is not matched because no one tries to match it. It is obsolete, redundant, pedestrian. Today I must be content to sin my deliberate sins, act out my fornication, and hope they will be sufficient to keep me in the gossip. You, however, have provided an opportunity for a different kind of sin, and so that is your answer."

I sat trying to trace deception in his words. Was this a clever ruse or a baring of the soul?

"You have given me much to think about, and yet I feel
I have insufficient wit to use it."

"My boy, all education begins somewhere, otherwise it never begins at all. This is an auspicious occasion for here lieth the beginning of something great."

The window which had earlier provided us with gray light had now turned into a black wall shaped like a Norman arch. I glanced down at my pocket watch and realized that I should go as it was about the time that gentlemen like Acton Lister (and myself in six months) gravitate towards their clubs. Besides, I had some letters to write before joining old college friends at Covent Garden.

"I think, Acton, that it is about time I was leaving, otherwise I shall be late myself and undoubtably disrupt your schedule."

"Schedules are eminently suited to disruption, but perhaps you are right. I'll get Morrison to call a cab for you. We can't have you dying of a chill before you receive your legacy, can we?"

Morrison duly hailed a cab and announced its arrival. I was at that moment strangely aware that it was difficult for me to break free from the studio. I wasn't sure if it was the place or Lister himself which held me there by some unseen force. Finally, I broke free, and Lister led me to the door and we passed out into the passageway. At once it was as though I had awoken from a dream. The atmosphere
seemed so different that it was hard to remember what it had been like in the studio.

Lister was talking to me as we walked along the passage, but I couldn't hear his words. So many thoughts rushed through my head that I could no longer perceive exterior sounds. I woodenly walked down the stairs until I realized that Lister was no longer with me. He remained halfway up the stairs as if held back by some invisible barrier. Perhaps he found the world below far too grotesque to enter into unless absolutely necessary.

I pulled myself together and addressed his comments concerning a future liaison.

"Come, Daniel, you really must agree to meet me for lunch."

I nodded agreement, and he said he'd send a servant indicating when he'd be available. I thanked him unnecessarily for his hospitality; I felt awkward about my distant daydreaming and overcompensated for it in my thanks. He seemed to understand, and the jowls around his chin quivered slightly as he smiled.

By now Morrison was standing like a stone figure holding my fully dried coat and hat. I slipped my arms deftly into the sleeves while Morrison pulled the coat over my shoulders. I placed the hat on my head and marched confidently towards the front door.
The rain was still falling as I splashed down the marble steps towards the cab. The horse neighed tremulously and seemed eager to begin the journey. Once seated in the cab, I looked out through the rows of tears on the cab window and stared as hard as I could at the great white walls of Lister's house. They stood silently resisting my attempts to pierce them. Soon the house rolled out of sight, and I was left with the clatter of the horse's hooves. As the carriage splashed through the flooding streets, the unknown houses, denoted only by their bright window squares, flashed by in a whirr. I looked back into the black drabness of the cab. Here I was being transported back to my own confident world. It almost seemed as though I had been to nowhere and now I was returning to the safety of somewhere.

I tried to mull over the man I'd just visited. It seemed as though he had no form, no body. If he had no body and by his own admission had lost his soul, then what was he? It was easy to place him as a "Who's Who" entry. His father was a renowned academician, and he had simply took up his father's profession. Unlike his father, he quickly established himself as a young and decadent socialite. His cynical, careless life was perhaps more famed than his art. This did not unduly bother him as notoriety was for him an end in itself. Every dinner party acquired Acton Lister as a foil to its less interesting guests. His clever
rhetoric won friends and enemies alike.

My contemplations were abruptly terminated by our arrival at my lodgings. I paid the cab driver and entered the red brick building in which my meager annuity forced me to live until my 25th birthday. As I proceeded up the narrow flight of stairs, I wondered why it was that Acton Lister had picked me. We had met previously at a number of uninspiring functions and he had taken me under his wing; protecting me from the predatory bores who always knew my uncle and talked incessantly about him. It was at one such function that he took me aside while we men sipped port in the drawing room and suggested that I pay him a visit. I realized that in his biting cynicism there was a feeling of warmth shown towards me which I appreciated but found difficult to understand. Acton Lister had captured me with his rhetoric, but there was something more. He certainly did not represent a father figure. His reckless antics and disregard of consequence negated any such ideal. There was in him some ethereal quality which he himself had recognized and had consciously used to bait his victim. This afternoon I had been drawn by invisible strings to his studio, and yet I felt willing to undergo the entrapment. It was, as he said, an education caught in its inception. I determined not to lose my own beginnings by being afraid. I would go again and feel the power of his hidden world.
With this resolved, I unlocked the door and entered 216 Brompton Square. My entrance immediately reminded me that I had allowed Hardcastle the evening off. The rooms were cold and the gas unlit. Having to dress myself did not seem completely beyond my capability, but the opera always required a little more effort. Thoughts of the opera filled me with unexpected weariness. It was always the same old crowd. Davis-Morton would bellicosely rant about his father's last speech in the Commons. Avery would undoubtably produce some dim-witted female, and the effable Miss Chase would barely deem to recognize me as anything other than a pauper who would soon be eligible enough unless anything untoward happened. Just to make sure, she would, for practical reasons of course, be seen only with those worth more than 2000 pounds a year.

Almost any social engagement would have been unappealing this evening. One afternoon of cloistered distraction spent with Acton Lister had produced a listlessness which made it difficult to motivate myself to anything other than thinking about the events which had already transpired.

There were a number of letters on the mantlepiece in my study, and I opened them paying little attention to the details of their content. There were the usual lackluster correspondences from my uncle's lawyers. I
had often pondered over the ability of lawyers to discuss the death of a once living, breathing, vibrant human being with such calm detachment. Even when writing to the wife or a close relative of the deceased, they failed to make any amendment to the cold, calculating appraisal of the financial condition of the deceased. One may presume that a gentleman with money is regarded by his trusted lawyers simply as a parcel of land. Upon the death of the man or the sale of the land, there begins the grinding, soulless machinery of the legal process.

However, I did prefer those communications to the ones which, in a strangely formal way, told me that I had already spent this month's allowance. These unfortunate missives went on to inform that, in case I had not realized, there were still 15 days of the month left. I doubt that these creatures of the legal world had any interest in how I would live for the next 15 days, so I failed to see why they bothered to write at all. Duty, that fine British quality, was no doubt responsible for most states of affairs, and lawyers were motivated solely by a sense of duty. If duty decreed that I should be cut-off from my legacy, then I would be. If duty commanded a loan for this month from the next month's allowance, then no doubt I would receive it. Unfortunately, duty never seemed to demand that my uncle's lawyers write interesting letters.
There was little doubt in my mind that the partners of Jamieson and Cartwright were somewhat peeved at having to be a party to the dissipation of my uncle's fortune. His cotton mills had ceaselessly produced their goods that I might live in splendid indolence. He, poor fellow, had died before his appointed time. Some say the heartache of wasting two shillings a week on his laborers was too much of a strain on his constitution. Alfred Pitson was judged by his close friends to be a clever man with money. By all others (except his lawyers), he was accused of being a miserly, bitter, cantankerous old devil who'd enjoy himself better the sooner he got to hell.

The subject of cotton reminded me that in order for me to inherit all that was my due, my dear Uncle Alfred had insisted that I be forced to keep at least two Lancashire cotton mills in my estate. This was done to ensure that I become acquainted with real labor. Accordingly, Jamieson and Cartwright had peremptorily sold all the mills to another of their clients except the two which would teach me the virtue of commerce. It seemed more likely that they would hang around my neck like some economic albatross. Anyway, the miserable point of this digression is that it appeared that I was expected to make a trip to Lancashire before I reached 25 in order to learn the business. The thought of learning anything in Lancashire touched me with
a deep sense of mortification. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad if I could spend a couple of days there and be back before the ditchwater atmosphere affected me too much. I also considered, as the letter reminded me, that perhaps I did indeed have certain responsibilities. The thought of my uncle plotting against me in this way, forcing responsibility on me, appalled my sense of fair play. Still, these things are best done in order that they may be forgotten.

I determined not to think further on the dismal subject. Tonight's amusements were not to be completely ruined by the leaden sky of Lancashire. I wondered, lingering a moment longer on the subject, if Lancashire had ever been blessed with such creatures as Acton Lister. It seemed unlikely that such beings could breathe the choking soot of such climes. Even should one survive the air, surely the inhabitants would choke the victim with their vile manners and flagrant ignorance. No, it was not an idea to be entertained while hope still remained in the bosom.

I addressed myself to the cold and somewhat spartan victuals left by Hardcastle. It was now six o'clock, and already the street outside was almost deserted. Even creatures of the most meager substance appeared to have sought their household fires. February was a damnable month in London at the best of times. The weather, the people, and the social calendar all joined together to create a most
unpleasant existence. Driving through the city was like being sluiced down long, dark, interconnecting tunnels. There was no light, no view, and precious little difference in any of the tunnels or their destinations. Social engagements seemed to drag on with a kind of tortured interminable length which made one frightfully susceptible to all kinds of bad behavior. One consumed too much alcohol at parties, insulted the hostess, and generally acted in an unbecoming way to one's betters and elders. It is not, of course, justifiable to blame all one's indiscretions on the weather. In Acton Lister's case, I'm sure the weather had little or no influence on his predilection for bad behavior. Despite his years or perhaps because of them, Lister's exploits seemed all the more sordid, and, as it seemed to me, daring. Lord Fothergill would beg to differ with me on the last count, no doubt. He had tried, unsuccessfully, to sue Lister for the ruination of the family name. All of London was aware of the affair between Lister and Fothergill's twenty year old daughter, Amelia. Amelia was what one might euphemistically call a capricious, headstrong girl, and there was little her family could do to terminate her, how shall we say, liason with Lister, even when they became aware of its existence.

Acton Lister's reputation was strengthened by his affairs, and the name "scoundrel" sat easily on his shoulders. Scandal
was and always had been an endearing quality of good society, and those who perpetuate it most vociferously become the champions of the cause. It was partly because of his 'cause célèbre' as a clever but wicked man that I was attracted to Lister. His knowledge and almost shameful philosophies were dangerously compelling to one beginning a road of discovery. I was, of course, also flattered by Lister’s obvious desire to in some way educate me. He claimed his regard for me was based on my obvious need for suitable supervision; also, as an artist he was attracted to what he described as "beauty as yet untouched by mime or act."

I was by all accounts a rather handsome child and had grown without particular cognizance into what mothers call 'charming manhood.' Lister made no bones about his attraction to my appearance; he described it as "the artist’s perfect challenge." He held that "there was no greater task in life than to create a perfect beauty from that which already appeared to have no fault." I hardly thought that I was perfect, but the attention I was receiving did not go unnoticed by my ego. Lister had once suggested to me that painting was a beggarly trade when one considers how much effort is expended in trying to create a work with only a drop of beauty found within. "On the other hand," he had said, "consider that which contains natural beauty such as a flower or a fair maiden: 'fair tresses man's
imperial race ensnares/And beauty draws us with a single hair. A lifetime's struggle surpassed by a single hair. There lies the misery bound around a skill such as mine."

I sympathized with his problem but relished its existence as a chance to join his world and sit in fascinated silence amongst the objects of his life.

I stirred myself from thought and hurriedly finished the remains of my repast. My dread of dressing was unexpectedly quieted by the discovery that Hardcastle had, in his supreme understanding of my life, laid out all the clothes I should be requiring for the opera. I never ceased to wonder at the genius of Hardcastle; I had not intimated to him my intention to attend the opera and yet here were the clothes. I marvelled at the prophetic visions this man must have. I dressed as quickly as a mortal could possibly do and hurried downstairs to the street. The weather seemed to have not only deterred pedestrians from walking abroad this evening but also cabs. I walked to the corner of the empty street, and after five minutes, I narrowly escaped death by jumping out into the path of a cab which seemed determined not to stop.

"Sorry, Guv'nor, I didn't see ya lurking about there in the dark," he said.

I assured him that I wasn't lurking and that I was in fact frantically waving my arms around trying to attract
his attention.

Within a few minutes, we were passing along Piccadilly and approaching Piccadilly Circus. At last there appeared to be other people alive in London. The Covent Garden operahouse was gaily lit with numerous lights and was definitively the most welcoming sight I'd seen since the sun had given up its job of lighting the planet. Throngs of people were running for the safety of the portico after being disgorged from their carriages and cabs.

I paid the driver and suggested that he might pay more attention to potential customers in the future; running them over would not make him a rich man. As I ran to escape the rain, he muttered something about "alive or dead, he'd stay poor."

The brightness of the foyer was almost garrish after the dismal black outside. After adjusting to the light, I began to look for acquaintances. I soon spotted the lanky figure of Alex Grange. Everything about Alex seemed out of proportion: his body, his clothes, his nose, and even the cigar which lolled somewhat unappealingly in his thin-lipped mouth. I quickly suppressed a burst of laughter as I noticed who he was talking to. Elizabeth Morton was the shortest, most absurdly diminutive creature on earth, and here she was, as if drawn by the fates, standing next to the tallest buffoon in London. No one else appeared to have noticed
this spectacle, so I thought perhaps I should desist from entertaining myself with the amusement any longer.

I weaved my way towards Alex Grange and his companion, trying to rid myself of the temptation to laugh the minute I greeted them. He had spotted me, and, gesturing, I responded to his acknowledgment. Eventually, I squeezed past all the obstacles and greeted the son of London's least respected circuit judge.

"My dear Rackham, I thought you'd never arrive," he laughed foolishly as if he'd said something clever. "You know Elizabeth, of course."

I assured him that I did and proceeded to ask Elizabeth how she was. She responded in a voice which sounded like a parrot in the process of being strangled.

"Why, Daniel, we hardly ever see you around these days. Gosh, it must be simply weeks since I've spoken to you."

I looked down at her and fumbled around, trying to justify my absence. Grange informed Elizabeth that I had been around but that I spent all my time with "that ghastly Acton Lister."

"Really, Grange, you do misconstrue the truth." I meant that he was a liar. "Actually, Elizabeth, I've had a slight cold for the last few days."

I was saved from further attempts at communication with these two victims of premature senility by the arrival of
Richard Blake. Blake soon retrieved me from the immediate danger of having to talk further with Grange. We discussed our dislike of Grange and managed to locate our seats. After a few moments, the lights went down and the curtain rose. At least I was safe for the next two and a half hours; no need to construct silly answers for absurd questions or worry about meeting people who one would rather not. I sat back, relaxed, and allowed myself to slip under the influence of the music. I fell into a trance and lay somewhere between Acton Lister's studio and the magical world of arcadia. Nothing else existed as I moved without body through the curling corridors of someone's life. Perhaps it was my own. It looked like me, but it felt as if I were someone else.
The sudden pain at the back of my eyes brought me into confused wakefulness. Forcing my lids open as little as possible, I squinted around, trying to grasp what was happening. The same thing happened every morning, and yet I never really grew accustomed to Hardcastle's blustering attempts to bring me into a new day.

"Hardcastle," I mouthed in a strained voice, "is it absolutely necessary for you to allow all the light in the world to enter this room so suddenly?"

"I'm afraid it is, sir." He pronounced the words with a hint of victory in his voice.

I raised my head a fraction from the pillow, trying to aid my understanding of the situation.

"It's already 8:30, sir, and you made it quite clear that this was the hour for your rising."

"Are you sure?" I muttered. "Whatever would possess a man to do such an ungodly thing."

"You might remember, sir, that the ungodly thing in question is the 11:40 from Charring Cross."
The awful truth settled on me like the indomitable fog which hung around the window. Today the fates had ordained that I should begin the great trip into oblivion, i.e. Bolton, Lancashire. I do perhaps unjustly blame the fates. It would be more accurate to place the guilt with the eminent firm of lawyers, Jamieson and Cartwright. It was, according to them, high time I made a pilgrimage to the place of my uncle's success. Trial seemed a more appropriate word than pilgrimage, but the pedantics of the issue appeared unimportant compared to the actuality of the situation.

"Hardcastle, perhaps you would be good enough to close the curtains just a fraction."

"Certainly, sir." He moved the curtains a smaller fraction than I had intended.

In the course of further discussion with the butler, I learned that everything was prepared, except myself, that is. The luggage had been delivered to the railway station, and my imminent arrival was obviously well anticipated. One could always rely on Hardcastle, perhaps a little more than was good for one in this case.

Hardcastle left the room and busied himself with the preparation of breakfast. I rose as nonchalantly as my pounding head would allow and proceeded towards the long French windows which looked out across the street below. I say I looked out across the street; that would have been
true under normal circumstances, but today the street did not exist. Swirling mist engulfed the house and shielded all else from view.

"What a ghastly day to be leaving home," I groaned. The misery of the occasion was enough in itself, but to have it compounded by this miserable fog was too much.

"Coffee, sir." Hardcastle produced the beverage without my dissent or assent, and I drank it without really tasting what it was. For all I knew, Hardcastle was a wretched poisoner and I was the victim, drinking his foul brew of strychnine. It tasted more like coffee than strychnine, so I continued to drink.

"Breakfast will be ready in 15 minutes. Perhaps I will help you to dress, sir?"

"That won't be necessary, Hardcastle. I fear my constitution would not endure both of us tugging at my body."

He slid quietly from the room, and I continued to take in the blank view from the window. Now and then I caught a quick glance of the top of a carriage as it rumbled eerily along the apparently empty streets. No doubt the trains would be delayed, and Hardcastle and I would spend an hour discussing his relatives and the latest in a string of offspring that various younger relatives had produced.

It had been two weeks since I had visited Acton Lister's studio, and the period had passed with a surprising lack of
anything too unpleasant. We had met as Lister suggested we should, and the meeting proved to be as inspiring as I anticipated it would.

Lister had invited me to accompany him to a small but, as he described it, thoroughly unpredictable restaurant on the Tottenham Court road. He called at my lodgings at 9:00, half an hour late, and we sped off in his carriage for an evening of pleasure. During the journey, we had made small talk, and I began to feel as if our special relationship was already waning. Upon our arrival at the rather inauspicious exterior of the restaurant, Lister became more animated and seemed eager to enter.

"Daniel, you must excuse my nervous excitement, but I have a darker purpose to explain concerning our attendance of this rather unassuming eatery."

I immediately questioned him as to the nature of this darker purpose, but he refused to utter another word on the subject, claiming that all would be revealed soon enough.

Having descended down a flight of steps, we entered the low-ceilinged vestibule of the restaurant. Here we were greeted by a rather fat, flamboyant Greek character who appeared to have lost any atavistic characteristics one might assume the race to have. He led us with, I might add, undue affectation into the main room of the restaurant. It was quite apparent that Acton Lister was known to the Greek
as he led us with flourish to a table in a corner which seemed to be invisibly inscribed with Lister's name.

"It would seem you are a regular here, Acton," I stated questioningly.

"Well, not exactly, dear boy, but I do pass by on the odd occasion." His answer seemed tinged with an odd sort of embarrassment. I eyed him furtively, trying to divine what his intentions were.

"Patience, patience, all will be revealed." He had noted my query and was trying to hold it back until he was ready to unleash it with his revelation.

The restaurant itself was a rather garish affair and seemed to have been thrown together with little consideration for taste or decorum. The furnishings clashed with the wallpaper, and the curtains looked like they'd been subconded from a brothel. Their bright gold tassles and purple brogue were hideous. It was then that I first noticed the ceiling. It was covered with a horrendous cartoon which appeared to be a cross between Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling and a Bacchanalial orgy. The resultant painting contained some of the most outlandish, repugnant sexual antics that I could remember seeing. I averted my eyes, not wishing to attract Lister's attention to my observations. There were several other groups of patrons in the restaurant, and collectively they presented themselves as a group suitable for the left
bank of the Seine rather than for a London restaurant.

"I see, Daniel, that you are disconcerted by the appearance of our fellow eaters." Lister had obviously noted my visual observations.

"Not at all. I was simply perusing the clientele and trying to establish some clues as to your motive for bringing me to such an establishment," I replied defensively.

"One does not need motives for being in such a place as this; it is replete with its own justification. This, my dear boy, is the twilight world of those who move in perpetual shadow. These characters are the artists. It is they who create the outer edges of experience."

I looked around again and noted the occupants of the various tables. They all appeared to aspire to a kind of not totally unappealing rakish foppery. The women appeared very definitely to belong to that class of luxuriant sensual females that can only be attached to the theater.

It was at that moment that I first became aware of the music which wafted through the smoke-filled heaviness of the air. The sounds were mystic and eastern. The experience reminded me a little of Lister's studio.

"This place is reward enough for the soulless hedonist," he remarked as he sipped on a glass of vintage champagne which the waiter had brought without being asked. "And
yet there is a jewel so magnificent that this humble crown is unfit to bear its weight." He pointed to a stage set across the farthest corner of the room. "That, my dear boy, is the plinth on which the rarest beauty in all the earth will bring to us her perfect form."

"Ah," I answered confidently, "you mean that there is to be a singer."

"A singer? Do not belittle the vision with such common description. This perfect beauty is not a singer. She is a messenger sent from Olympus to bring us the music of the gods."

Now I understood... Acton Lister was in love with yet another whose womanly charms had temporarily caught his imagination.

As if divining my skepticism, Lister began to recite the words of Rossetti: "'This is that Lady Beauty, in whose praise/They voice and hand shake still, long known to thee/By flying hair and fluttering hem,—the beat/Following her daily of the heart and feet,/How passionately and irretrievably,/In what fond flight, how many ways and days!' No, my innocent lad, this is not infatuation. This is mesmerism."

It seemed to me that Lister had much in common with Rossetti. Whether this was good or bad I could not discern at present.

We consumed our rather mediocre dinner, and I prepared to
meet Acton Lister's new love. Before long, a small ensemble moved onto the back of the stage and began to play some rather sentimental, unimportant love songs of the day. As they played, Acton became noticeably more agitated, and he managed to transfer his nervous expectation into my own bosom. By the time the lady in question came into view, I was almost beyond myself with excitement.

Her arrival precipitated an immediate hush. The previous clanking of glasses and loud clammering conversation ceased and all eyes followed the path of Alicia LaFelice. As I caught my first view of her, my breath remained inescapable in my throat. She was beyond comparison. Her eyes glittered like burning sapphires, and her marble white skin turned the harsh lights into a silver sheen. Her hair ran like dark rivers cascading down her back.

As she began to sing, her lips arched and rippled with the escaping sounds. It was hard to hear her words for the visual seemed to override all else.

All too soon her songs were ended, and she retreated from our lives. My trapped emotion was released by Lister's words.

"Well, what do you think, Daniel? Is she not the most perfect thing that was ever created?"

"Indeed, she is." I agreed without being able to find words to express my emotion.

"She, Daniel, has created a new goal in my life. Not only
must I paint you, I must paint you both. It will be my ruin, but what a glorious ruin it will be."

I felt uncomfortable being judged in any way similar to the creature we had just seen, but I was too weak to protest.

My memories of that first time I set eyes on Alicia LaFelice were thrown back into the recesses of my brain by Hardcastle's entrance and announcement that breakfast was served. I muddled through my food having lost most of the little appetite I had. Indeed, my appetite had already been meager. The excesses of the previous evening had left me with little interest in food.

I had gone out every night since the visit with Lister to the restaurant. Usually I and like-minded acquaintances passed from bar to bar until I had managed to remove the image of her face. There was a sort of desperation in these sorties. Recklessness was the key. Perhaps I too would soon be regarded in the same light as Lister. I feared my reasons for this behavior were bound to a dangerous feeling. Lister had ensnared me with his clever charm and now perhaps a new threat to my freedom was being thrown upon me. I had not seen the girl since that first night, and I had avoided Acton Lister, determined not to be thrown against my weak nature.

It was with a certain relish that I viewed this trip. Everything about it would be odious, but it would, I hoped,
afford a return to my senses. I did not enjoy the topsy-turvy sensations I was undergoing and was sure that a week in Lancashire would cure me of the ill.

Hardcastle flustered around, reminding me of the arrangements and gently encouraging me to make as much haste as possible as the cab would undoubtedly take longer than normal to reach the station in this weather. I reminded him that 11:00 a.m. on Wednesday morning was hardly a busy hour and that there would be plenty of time.

After a number of false starts, we finally departed the lodgings. As we launched off into the sea of mist, I glanced back at the lodgings, but already they no longer existed. The horse trotted along at a reasonable pace despite the fog, and as we began to approach Charring Cross the fog began to thin. The great looming glass cathedral became slowly more visible as we approached its huge entrance. It felt like we would be swept into it with the fog and be consumed in its great iron jaws.

Having disembarked, Hardcastle established the whereabouts of our luggage and arranged for its conveyance to the train. The North Star stood in all its resplendent green and black livery peering out of the covered platform into the engulfing mist. Hardcastle found our seats, and we mounted the train with ten minutes to spare.

It was then that I remembered the letter I'd written to
Acton Lister. Hardcastle, as efficient as ever, had a stamp, and so he disembarked the train and posted the letter in a platform mailbox. The letter contained an apology and explanation for my departure and suggested that I call upon Lister upon my return in one weeks time. I left my forwarding address and said I hoped Lister would write and thus relieve the tedium of a week spent in misery. Upon Hardcastle's return, we made ourselves as comfortable as first class would allow for and awaited our departure.

The train jolted into movement and slowly we slid out of the glass temple and drove straight into the heart of the mist. The train gathered speed as it snaked out through the open ground beyond the station. Hardcastle produced a copy of the Times and I contented myself with reading it from cover to cover. By the time I had completed this task, it was time for lunch and we adjourned to the dining car. The soup was adequate, but alas the pheasant seemed more like duck.

By early afternoon, the mist had cleared considerably as we sped through the Midlands. The green and brown fields nearest the railway tracks shot by and those furthest away formed an ever-changing patchwork landscape. Occasionally, we passed alongside ribbon-like canals. Few boats plied their waters for this was the age of steam. The slow but sure pace of the decorative narrowboats with their gaily painted
interiors had given way to the brash thundering roar of the steamtrain. The one seemed so peaceful and gentle while the other was so violent and intrusive. What a pity it was that progress never included harmony.

Upon returning to our carriage, I found it to be partially occupied by two elderly ladies. I did not look forward to an afternoon in their company. Hardcastle had already made himself scarce, anticipating the scenario, and I was left alone with two aged spinsters. I greeted them with considerable affability, and they replied by introducing themselves and asking a number of questions relating to the nature of my journey. I related to them as briefly as possible the purpose of my trip and silently prayed that their need for communication would be stemmed.

It was not to be. For the next four hours until tea time I was forced to endure the many and varied stories of their lives. After the second hour, I had already donated a considerable sum to one certain philanthropic society of which they were the only living founder members. This demonstration of my generosity did not, however, succeed in ending their interest in me. It seemed terribly unfair that I had been chosen to receive this immense torment. After having heard of the transformation in the lives of African tribesmen once they were converted, I could see how they must have felt. I would have willingly converted
to Shintu in order to procure the termination of this ordeal.

Do not misunderstand my feeling for these two stoical ladies in question. They were indeed paragons of virtue, and their lives were undeniably spotless. However, being confronted by such an onslaught in an enclosed space is not a circumstance I would willingly undergo again in the immediate future.

Having finally tempted providence onto my side, I was able to wave the dear ladies goodbye at a small town in the Black Country. It was to be their last stand against the evils of drink and godless behavior. I almost felt sorry for the town; it could have little knowledge of what was about to hit it.

As we pushed further north, the landscape began to change. The train became increasingly involved in the climbing and circumnavigation of hills. The smooth fields of the south now gave way to ever more rugged crags and steeps. The landscape was completely bare except for the clusters of white sheep huddling behind dry stone walls. Occasionally, a trail of smoke scudding across the skyline would denote the existence of some shepherd's home. The sky began to grow dark and heavy towards late afternoon. Its pinkish tinge told of possible snow ahead.

It wasn't long before the once-green dales began to grow dark in the fading light of evening. Falling snow
drove fast against the windows of the train. It was, it seemed, trying to force us back, to stop us from reaching our destinations. Soon the whole landscape lost its shape in the rolling line of snow. Sharp peaks became rounded summits, and the low troughs were gently filled flat with piling snow. The cold bleak scenery made me shudder, and yet I felt an almost sublime warmth within my soul.

I was passing through this sparse landscape and yet remained withheld from its wintery blasts. The carriage was supremely cozy with its warm lamps glowing and its small walls closing me in, sheltering me from the reality on the other side of the window.

With this attitude prevailing, I gradually slipped from consciousness into sleep. The rhythmic rumbling of the wheels on the tracks gradually lulled me like a sympathetic heartbeat into the dim world of half-remembered dreams.

It was three hours later when a hand pressed my shoulder and a familiar voice echoed around the carriage.

"Sir, my apologies for waking you, but we are approaching the outskirts of Bolton." Hardcastle's toneless voice was reassuring. Sleep had left me strangely empty, and his voice filled up the void.

I answered as crisply as my sleep lulled senses would allow for.
"What time is it, Hardcastle?"

"A quarter to nine."

"Well, the time seems to have passed most efficiently," I said, relieved that the journey was over.

I peered out of the misted window and noted that it was still snowing. Across the void I caught a glimpse of the dancing flames of an iron blaster. Though the great open doors of the furnace, tiny figures moved about involved in some great process. They reminded me of the hellish figures in Dante's Inferno. Soon they were lost to view as the train passed through a deep cutting. As the train deaccelerated, more factories, chimneys, and warehouses came into view. Even through the dense white flakes, I could see the palls of livid smoke belch from the rows of sentinel stacks. My eyes passed down their lengths to roofs of the factory and then on to the ground. It was only then that I noticed the rows of half-hidden dwellings huddling along the walls of the factories. Row after row of identical drab faceless houses known as 'back to backs' ran parallel to each other all around the chimneys and factories. Like village cottages surrounding a church, they paid homage to their source of life.

My view was quickly ended by the trains entrance into a tunnel. The noise of the wheels thudding on the tracks became deafening, and as the air pressure increased, my
ears popped as they compensated for the pressure. Suddenly the train burst into the brightly lit brick and wooden structure of Bolton station. A few strangling passengers shuffled around on the platform, banging their feet on the blue brick surface trying to keep warm.

During my perusals, Hardcastle had been rushing about in his restrained way, organizing our luggage. This task being completed, he returned to the carriage and suggested that we disembark. We did so and emerged into the extremely cold air of Platform 3. A porter was grabbed, and our luggage was conveyed to a cab. Hardcastle maintained that nobody would be there to greet us because in spite of the snow we had arrived 40 minutes earlier than scheduled. I marvelled at the ability of trains to be usually late and sometimes early but never on time.

On entering our cab, I gave the address to the driver. He answered in a particularly unpleasant dialect, and we set off into the vast brick town of Bolton. A sudden weariness overtook me, and I paid little attention to the route and its landmarks. After some time, we came to a stop in what appeared to be a suburban neighborhood. Having paid the driver and illiciting a further incomprehensible comment, we arrived at our place of domicile.

The arrival of our cab caused a number of lights to go on in the house, and before we had reached the entrance
the door was opened and we were greeted by a rotund lady of around 50 years of age.

"Welcome to the house, Master Rackham," she shouted with considerable gusto. "You're rather early, so we didn't rightly fix everything up yet."

I assured her that this was of no matter and proceeded to ask the good lady her name. Mrs. Hawthorn, it turned out, had been in the service of my uncle for a good many years, and she was honored to see me after so many years. I embarrassedly agreed that it had been a good many years. In fact, I did not remember Mrs. Hawthorn at all. My ignorance was fully revealed when by way of small talk I asked how Mr. Hawthorn was doing.

"Mr. Hawthorn passed away over 20 years ago, sir."

"Oh, I do beg your pardon, Mrs. Hawthorn. Of course, I was referring to your son."

She appeared to accept the excuse and went on to describe in some detail the life of her son, John Hawthorn. At that moment, the much talked of son arrived on the scene and began to take in our luggage. He appeared to be a rather oafish fellow, but no doubt he had a good heart.

I intimated to Mrs. Hawthorn that the journey had tired me somewhat, and accordingly she directed me to my uncle's bedroom. The house had been occupied by my uncle at such times as when he was unable to return to his country seat
which was situated about 20 miles hence.

The house was built in a rather unassuming manse style which comprised five bedrooms. The decor was plain but presentable, and I decided that it was not a bad place to stay for a week. My trunk was brought to the room by John, and Hardcastle began to unpack it.

"Hardcastle, I fear I'll not be able to endure watching you unpack that damn thing. Do you think it could possibly wait until tomorrow?" I flopped back onto the rather hard four-poster bed.

"Indeed, it may be left until tomorrow, but I fear your clothes will be ruined," he answered haughtily.

"Well, then let them be ruined. I'd rather them be ruined than myself."

"Very well, sir. Is there anything else you'll be requiring?"

"No, nothing at all, thank you, and I suggest you retire yourself. It's been an arduous day."

"Thank you, sir."

As the door closed, I sat up and looked around the room. It had the appearance of a room which was no longer regularly slept in. The toilet articles on the dresser and the furnishing in general looked as if they were there for guests and not for a permanent inhabitant. Well, at least my uncle didn't die in this room. I comforted myself with the thought
and began to undress. I switched the light off, climbed into bed, and stared into the darkness. I was glad the journey was over. It was a relief to be here. Tomorrow I would visit the mills and see for myself how it was that such an airy inconsequential thing as cotton had made the family fortune. I say family fortune, but my uncle really didn't have any family at all save me. It seemed sadly futile that he should spend his life working to increase his family's wealth only to find that his family was comprised of only one immediate relative — myself. His wife, Letty, had passed away ten years before, and they had had no children. Rumor had it that Alfred Pitson was unable to have children. I would have thought it was a good thing if he could not. In my youth I remembered him as being the sort of man who hated children, leastways he always seemed to dislike me. Perhaps he despised children because he never had any of his own. I was only too glad that he was not my father. Visiting his country seat twice a year was quite sufficient to stamp upon my mind the image of a bitter and sometimes malevolent man. It must, I thought, have been a terrible trial for his wife. He ruled his servants and wife alike with an inflexible will which was scarcely different to tyranny. His marriage was certainly no recommendation for the institution. Thinking as I occasionally did on the subject of marriage, I was always
reminded of Uncle Alfred's marriage; after that, try as I might, I could never think of any advantages to being married.

I knew little of my own parents marriage as they were both lost in a shipping disaster off the coast of southern Africa. My father was an official in the foreign service, and I had seen him but rarely. My youth was spent in the attendance of various boarding schools and then college. Consequently, my closest link to the family unit was with my uncle. It is perhaps because of this that I had a low opinion of marriage.

Before my aunt's death, she had often spoken of my parents and always portrayed them as being truly in love and being a wonderfully happy couple. She spoke of them with a kind of wistful yearning that always made me sad.

My uncle, on the other hand, would counter my aunt's comments by asking what good love had done them. My father had died almost penniless, and his heir was thrown upon the mercy of his sister's husband, Alfred Pitson. I suspected that in actual fact he was glad that I had been thrown upon his mercy, for at least he had someone upon which to bestow his wealth. He was not a fabulously wealthy man, but I judged that his fortune would easily last my lifetime.

At last I was unable to continue my reflections any further. The power and weight of sleep began to press upon
me, and I prepared for a night of well-earned sleep. Outside an owl hooted and a fox barked in the distance. The sounds were unfamiliar to a dweller of South Kensington, and they filled me with a feeling of relaxed contentment. Tomorrow would be filled with less pleasant experiences, I pondered, and so I'd better savor these sensations while I could. I pulled the covers of the bed high over my head to shelter me from the chill air of the room.
The two Pitson mills were situated about one mile apart from each other in the great urban sprawl of a typical northern town. We arrived at the first mill at about 10:30 in the morning. The snow had ceased to fall, but its blanket still covered some of the ugliness of the town. The mill building was a typical product of the industrial era. It was built without any concern for form, only function. It was a high red brick building with windows dotted down its sides which were scarcely large enough to be windows at all. They were criss-crossed with wrought iron bars which made the whole building resemble a prison. Even from the outside, one could distinctly hear the clatter of machinery. As we approached the small entrance door to the offices, the noise grew louder. Once inside the characterless ledger offices, I was formally introduced to the various clerks by Mr. Thurtón, the works manager. The tedium of their employ showed in their faces. They looked as though the continual computation of another man's figures had finally driven them to becoming like the
mechanical adding machines they used to aid their task.

Thurton led me through a series of partitioned offices, each having on their door such thoroughly mercantile titles as "Bill of Sales," "Invoicing," and so on. The volume of Thurton's voice increased as we grew nearer the actual mill. His explanations were suddenly drowned by a blast of violent noise as he pushed open a heavy wooden door, and we entered the factory itself.

It is hard to describe what was occurring within the mill itself. The uninitiated may find it hard to grasp. Visually, I was confronted by long rows of great wooden and iron machines whose various parts were heaving up and down and moving from side to side. Behind each machine stood an operator who in some cases was no more than 15 years old and often of the female sex. The machine workers performed a strange almost ritualistic movement which involved arms, body, and legs alike. The contorted positions of their forms bespoke the difficulty of the task they performed. The object of the business, cotton, was evidently represented by the thousands of skeins and threads which were pulled first this way and then that by the great mechanical arms of the machines. Above the machines at regular but long intervals hung shaded lights; they supplemented the little light allowed in by the diminutive windows in the walls. No light penetrated the skylights which were fixed in the 'V' shaped
roofs, as the snow had prevented all light from entering.

The noise which I'd heard from without the building bore no resemblance to the thundering roar with which I was now confronted. Every part of each machine seemed to scream as it moved with unending monotony. Huge driven belts whined and hummed as they drove the machines with power. The great moving beams of iron and wood banged and thumped with deafening repetition at every stage of their program. Indeed, the only thing which made no noise at all was the poor rag-covered humans who stood behind the machines. They were the last link with humanity, the problem that the designer needed to overcome in order to make the machines fully automated.

As we walked through the lines of speeding machines, I looked into the faces of the workers. They responded by lowering their heads and averting their lifeless eyes. Their poor bodies were aching with the strain of standing in such an unnatural stance all day. These were the occupants of the "back to backs" that I had seen as the train approached Bolton.

I shouted across to Thurton, asking if we might leave. He looked across at me as if to say 'I knew you wouldn't like it' and we climbed down a nearby set of wooden stairs. I declined going over the books that day and asked instead if we might see the housing which my uncle had built for
his workers. Thurton appeared to think that this was unnecessary.

"I don't think you'd find much to interest ya there, sir," he replied, trying to put me off the idea.

"Mr. Thurton, I assure you I will find something to interest me there, but if you will not then I shall go by myself."

He quickly assented to accompanying me, and we departed immediately. He suggested we might walk there as it was little distance from the mill.

Thurton was, by my first impression, a rather unpleasant fellow. There was an air of contemptible hardness about him which was quite alarming. It was, perhaps, for that very reason that my uncle had employed him, I conjectured. He was a large barrel-chested man of medium height and about 50 years of age. He was dressed in course woolen leggings and dirty brown corded trousers. His waistcoat looked as if he had stolen it from a man who was two sizes smaller than himself. The tweed worsted jacket had lost its buttons and was secured by a length of twine. Upon his balding pink head he wore a greasy cap.

As we wandered along the outer wall of the mill in the direction of the houses, I asked him of the workers and their wages and conditions. He assured me that conditions and wages alike were more than suitable for "the likes of them
I failed to see how someone who stood at such machines for 11 hours a day could be described as a scrounger or a loafer; however, I did not press the point further as we were now approaching what my uncle had called "Pitson Vale." "Pitson Vale" was two lines of back to back houses which numbered 32 in all.

We walked on to the beginning of the row of dwellings and surveyed them. The design of the houses had obviously involved no reference to the dweller whatsoever. They were constructed solely on the guidelines of cost effectiveness. My uncle's demand must have been "build as many as you can as cheaply as possible." The result, I found, was an unpleasant shock. Each narrow house was joined on three sides by other houses, hence the name "back to back." This building technique meant that windows could only be placed on one side of the house: the front. One window upstairs and one downstairs. The houses had no gardens and faced immediately onto the street. My uncle had considered pavements unnecessary, and consequently the front door of each home opened out onto the path of any carriage which passed by. On further reflection, it seemed unlikely that such vehicles would have cause to pass this way. The occupants would never have money or reason to use
them, and the roads were not main thoroughfares. In fact, they went nowhere at all.

"Am I right in assuming that Alfred Pitson's estate still owns these houses?" I asked Thurton.

"Ay, sir. You'd be right in thinking that. Mr. Pitson himself had 'em built and right good quality they are as you can see."

"My dear fellow, you can hardly call such poorly designed housing as this good," I answered.

"Well, I don't know about that, sir, but some of them there lazy good-for-nothings don't deserve no roof at all, sir."

I ignored Thurton's obvious prejudice and proceeded to ask if we might enter one of the houses and look around. Thurton was finally forced to submit to my demands, and he proceeded to knock on the brown painted door of a nearby house. After a good deal of shouting from within the house, the door was finally opened. In the doorway stood a dirty little urchin wearing hand-me-downs which would have fitted someone twice his age.

"Wha' do ya want?" he bawled at us.

Before I could answer, Thurton had boxed the child across the side of the head with a hefty blow.

"What the devil do you think you're doing, Thurton?" I shouted.
"Just teaching him some manners, sir."

By this time, the child had run screaming back into the darkness of the house and was immediately replaced by what appeared to be the child's mother. She was a thin wiry creature who looked 40 but was probably in her mid-twenties. Her worn thin face looked questioningly at me.

"I'm awfully sorry about what happened to your son," I apologized.

She seemed frightened as she answered, "He didn't mean no harm, sir, it was just that he doesn't see many gentlemen, sir, so he don't know what to say."

"Well, that's quite alright. I'm Mr. Pitson's nephew, and I wondered if we might have a look around your house. I want to familiarize myself with everything."

"You ain't going to evict us, are you, sir? Only Mr. Thurton said he was going to throw us out." She began to cry.

"Really, Thurton! What in God's name do you think you're doing harrassing these people like this? No, madam, I can assure you that you will not be evicted."

Thurton answered protestingly, "You don't understand, Mr. Rackham. Her old man is the laziest son of a..."

"That will be enough. I'll discuss your behavior with you when we return to the mill."

After some further discussion, I was led into the house.
Its downstairs consisted of two rooms, the back one being in perpetual darkness unless artificially lit. The small, dark kitchen contained an old gas cooker and a stone wash basin which at least appeared to be connected to the mains supply. There was one small open cupboard on the bare plaster walls, and that was the extent of the furnishing. The living room, a somewhat optimistic title, was the same size as the kitchen and had the advantage of a window. The disadvantage of the window appeared to be that it let in almost as much draft as it did light. The room had as its focal point a small empty hearth. Upon enquiry, I discovered that the occupants were unable to afford any coal this winter, and their only source of heat was the wood or coal to be found along the edge of the railway lines.

The walls of this room showed signs of having once been wallpapered. The only remaining evidence of wallpaper was the dirty patches of damp ripped paper clinging desperately to the wall.

We mounted the steep, dark stairs which led to the upstairs. Here I found two identical rooms being used as bedrooms. The front room contained the marriage bed and an old rickety cot by its side. In amongst the jumble of coverings there lay a sleeping baby. In the back room were three straw pallets covered in old ripped sheets. They covered the entire floor area,
and one had to walk on them in order to get from one side of the room to the other. I was told sneeringly by Thurton that the family had four children, and the lady was expecting again. I pondered the miserable conditions this family was forced to endure in order to have the privilege of working in my uncle's mill.

We descended the stairs and prepared to depart. As we left, I thanked the woman for allowing us to look around, and I promised her I'd get the family some coal. As we were passing through the front door, three children, including the victim of Thurton's temper, came down the street. They were returning from a trip along the railway line in search of coal. I gave the mother a shilling and departed before we got caught in the doorway by the three children and their sacks.

"You shouldn't have done that, sir," Thurton muttered with obvious reference to my gift and promise of coal. "If they can get something for nothing then they won't work for it."

I answered him accusingly, "I suppose you wouldn't take something for nothing? I suggest you mind your own business and remember you are an employee just as they are."

My outburst quieted Thurton, and we walked back towards the mill. I felt that the day had not begun well. I'd seen the mill, argued with the hard-nosed Thurton,
and witnessed the wretched living conditions of the people my uncle claimed to employ so benevolently. How many people across the country were living in conditions like these poor individuals? Forced, as they were, into servitude by the advancement of industry and commerce. What had these people benefited from the marvels of modern science or the invention of new machinery? Their lives were sinking lower and lower into the squalid abyss of poverty.

I had seen enough of this my first morning in Bolton. As late morning wore on, it almost seemed as though it were late afternoon. The sky looked sullen and the air became heavy with expected snow. I informed Thurton that I wouldn't be requiring him any more that day. He seemed relieved, and I must admit I was looking forward to returning to my uncle's house.

As I stepped into the waiting carriage, I looked back towards the mill. Its reddish-brown bulk sprawled across the off-white landscape. It rose above the snow like some great earthwork. It appeared so unnatural as though it had been thrown there randomly. My uncle's wealth had been achieved at great price, I pondered. As the carriage drove away, I thought of the family of six who lived in that dark and damp house. I concluded that this was indeed a God-forsaken land. Its fires stoked the wealth of the rich Londoners while those who toiled day and night had not
even enough to buy coal to heat their homes.

When I reached home, a letter was waiting for me. Mrs. Hawthorn presented it to me before I'd barely had time to remove my coat. The envelope bore no stamp, so I assumed it had been hand-delivered.

"Who delivered this letter, Mrs. Hawthorn?"

Mrs. Hawthorn was standing directly behind me and was apparently in the process of trying to look over my shoulder in an attempt to read the contents of the letter.

"Well, sir, it was Mr. and Mrs. Goodson's messenger, begging your pardon."

She moved around from behind me and stood in front with her embarrassed visage becoming increasingly redder.

"If there's nothing else you'll be needing then I'll be about my business. Lunch will be ready in half an hour, sir, if that's convenient."

I assured her that it was convenient, and she shuffled away to the kitchen.

As I proceeded to the study, I began to read the note. It was as Mrs. Hawthorn intimated from the Goodsons. They were, if I remembered rightly, friends of my uncle. I remembered their attendance at one of my uncles rare dinner parties a number of years age. Mr. Goodson was, of course, a mill owner. His wife was of the sort which was in the habit of organizing the ladies of the town in
such benevolent activities as making gloves and socks for the poor of the community. No doubt she was also highly regarded for the nourishing broth which she distributed to the unemployed and destitute. It was a strange irony that the poor she lavished her good deeds on were in fact the employed and redundant workers of her husband's mills. What his latest machines had made obsolete his wife had managed to feed with broth.

I marvelled at my cynicism towards a family I hardly knew and decided that my behavior was attributable to the morning I had just passed. I determined to be less angry and continued to read the letter.

"Mr. and Mrs. Goodson request the pleasure of your company for dinner at 7:30 this evening." What a ghastly idea, I thought; I wondered if I was really made of stern enough metal for this terribly unpromising task. Perhaps, like this trip itself, it was my duty to go. If I go, I said to myself, then I will not think of the subject again till this evening, thereby standing some chance of enjoying the remainder of the afternoon.

My uncle's study had taken on a rather bright and warm appearance this afternoon. A large, crackling fire was blazing in the brazier, and the light from the dancing tongues of yellow flame dashed around the walls of the room like demonic dancers. I wandered rather contentedly
around the room, examining its various furnishings. Having circumnavigated the room entirely, I returned to the shelves which occupied almost one entire wall of the study. I eventually found a rather excellently bound copy of Tacitus' "Annals of Rome" and began to read.

My contentment with being in this room was such that when Mrs. Hawthorn came to tell me lunch was ready, I asked if I might have my lunch in the study.

"Mr. Pitson always took his lunch in the dining room," she replied. She then went on to admit that it was possible, and within a moment she produced my lunch on a tray.

"Will you be wanting dinner this evening, sir, or will you be dining out?"

I sated Mrs. Hawthorn's curiosity by telling her of my invitation to the Goodson's residence.

"Well, that will be nice for you, sir. It will give you a chance to see some of the gentlefolk, although I might say, sir, that there are very few of them left."

I thanked her for her observations concerning the demise of the upper class. I fear she may have thought that I mocked her as she left the room rather suddenly and with considerably fewer words that she was accustomed to using.

After lunch, I decided to continue my perusal of my uncle's books. It was a pleasant distraction, and I was
surprised at the worthiness of many of the tomes my uncle had collected. He did not really strike one as being a literary man. In fact, most of his philosophies and ideas seemed to be of the home-spun variety rather than being the product of extensive reading. Still, I suppose that the nature of the community encouraged him to at least try to compensate for it by way of good literature.

As I browsed through a collection of 17th century poetry, I began to wonder what Acton Lister would be doing at this moment. No doubt he'd be hiding himself in his studio under the pretext of painting. Even though I was hundreds of miles away from the words of Lister, I felt a strange feeling of akinness with him. As I sat in my uncle's study, I felt I had an ethereal proximation to Acton in his studio. And yet how different the places were. Here, I was the master, the controller, and I felt totally at ease. In Lister's studio, I was subordinated by his presence. I felt helpless under his charm, captured by his thoughts. How odd that I could be a master in one place and virtually a slave in the other. There was, I sensed, a growing paradox surrounding my relationship with Acton Lister, one whose mystery taunted me to search for an answer.

The warm atmosphere of the fire was not conducive to such thought, and as I gazed with glazed eyes into the red and yellow heat, the solidity of my thoughts melted into
nebulous abstraction. Soon my eyelids closed, and I could only feel the half-sensed heat through my skin. As I slept, dreams danced around the room. I felt the sounds of strange music, and I drank in the voice of one whose hair ran like rivers down her back. I passed before my eyes but did not recognize who I was.

It was not until Hardcastle brought my dinner jacket that I began to wish it were I that had been ruined and not the unpacked clothes. With a look of smug satisfaction, on his face, Hardcastle informed me that my clothes were somewhat wrinkled.

"Hardcastle, your powers of understatement never cease to amaze me. They're not wrinkled, they're utterly destroyed. What shall I do?"

"Do, sir?"

"Yes, do!"

"Well, if I might suggest..."

"You can suggest anything you like, but just do something!"

"Very well, sir. I shall see if I cannot restore the jacket to its previous condition."

He left the room with a sublime mastery of his master. I, in contrast, was in the process of having a nervous breakdown. Ten minutes later, Hardcastle returned, flourishing what could easily be mistaken for a brand new dinner jacket.

"Hardcastle, you are a miracle worker, and remind me
to never disobey any of your unpacking instructions again. From now on, you shall be my guide in all matters concerned with carrying out my life."

He eyed me bemusedly and said, "Thank you, sir, I shall endeavor to lead as best I can," to which he added that I had exactly 15 minutes in which to dress.

After suffering from my second nervous breakdown in the last 10 minutes, I was finally convinced by Hardcastle that there was plenty of time.

I was driven in my uncle’s carriage to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Goodson by John Hawthorn. He claimed to know the way to the said destination, but after 10 minutes of travel I began to recognize the street we were passing down as one we had passed only moments before. I shouted up to my driver and enquired if he really knew where he was going. He answered that he was a little confused by the snow and that the roads all looked the same to him in four inches of the said substance.

After passing along other false trails, we finally established the whereabouts of the Goodson residence. I thanked Hawthorn, a trifle too sarcastically perhaps, and suggested if it were not beyond his skills of navigation that he return for me in two and a half hours. He confidently assured me he could and proceeded to drive the carriage off in the opposite direction to home.
Mr. Goodson greeted me with a rough slap on the back and the statement that he could see that I was a Pitson through and through. I had never considered myself to look like my uncle at all. Indeed, my father was my uncle's brother-in-law, so I had absolutely no inherited physical qualities whatsoever. I had also considered it a blessing that most people said I looked like my aunt, Alfred Pitson's wife.

Mr. Goodson was the kind of fellow who was proud of his ruddy complexion and somewhat colloquial use of the English language. He was of that class that insists on reminding all and sundry that his father was poor and that he made himself what he was by dint of hard work. He also scorned those with education, claiming that the world was sufficient education for any man. In fact, one might say that Mr. Goodson regarded his lack of formal education as a virtue. He was, I concluded, the kind of man who disliked everything he could not immediately understand. Being ruled by this assumption, I determined to make myself as understandable as possible. The thought of this fellow bellowing abuse into my ear all evening did not appeal to my sensibilities.

Goodson led me by the arm into the drawing room. Here I was introduced to Mrs. Goodson, Mr. Trubshaw, and Miss Calhoun. Mrs. Goodson was a large, rounded, amply busted
creature who seemed to almost fill the room with her presence. Her face had no doubt once been slender and attractive; now it had grown fat on the fine fare her husband's wealth had produced. She was the sort that had no discernable neck. Her head sat rather comically, I thought, on her big milk-white shoulders. On reflection, I decided that it was her dress which created the comic element rather than the neckless head. She, like many who rise through the social ranks with enormous rapidity, had failed to pick up any sense of dress along the way. She wore a great billowing red taffeta dress whose neckline plunged dangerously at both front and rear. At every point, the material strained, trying to escape the demands of her flesh. It was surely a marvel how she managed to get the dress on in the first place.

"Daniel, you can't believe how pleased we are to see you, and we all know you'll continue the fine job your dear uncle was so sadly unable to complete." She smiled as she spoke, and her voice made one think of soap suds oozing from a copper boiler.

"It was most kind of you to invite me to dinner, Mrs. Goodson, and I only hope I can live up to your expectations."

Mr. Goodson began growling as if to speak, so I ended my address there.

He began to speak.
"Allow me to introduce Mr. Trubshaw, the local head­master, and Miss Calhoun, a founding member of the Bolton philanthropic society."

The thought of more old ladies with philanthropic tendencies did not augur well. By the end of the evening, I would probably end up giving my fob watch to charity.

Mr. Trubshaw, I suspect, had been produced for the evening as an attempt to give the party an intellectual touch. No doubt they had determined that a young man from London would feel more at home if there was a token guest from the world of academics. It was, I thought, a touching gesture. However, I did feel sorry for Mr. Trubshaw; he stood not knowing where to put himself. He obviously felt out of his depth with the abrasive Goodson and his voluminous wife.

Trubshaw was a tall, thin, balding gentleman of around 60 years of age. He wore a pair of round, brass-framed spectacles. His head seemed to rest between his shoulders as if some excessive weight had pressed it there. On further reflection, I considered that his form was bent in this way because of the years and years he'd been subjected to the onslaughts of tiresome schoolchildren.

Trubshaw spoke with a gentle, unassuming voice which seemed all the more appealing after the brash tones of our hostess.
"Good evening, Mr. Rackham. It is a pleasure to meet you." He produced a long, thin, delicately formed hand, and I shook it.

All that remained for me now was to be welcomed by Miss Calhoun. She was a slight creature who appeared to be pressing God's law of three score and ten. Her face was etched with lines, and her bonnet was pressed firmly on her white-haired head.

"I am delighted to meet you, Miss Calhoun. You are to be honored for such diligent service to the less privileged."

She answered in a tremulous voice which was, for her age, surprisingly clear.

"Young man, I remember taking your uncle for rides in his perambulator when I was only fifteen years old. I must say, however, that he was never as handsome as you have grown. I trust that with your good looks you have also procured a better temperament."

Hastily, Mrs. Goodson interrupted her.

"Miss Calhoun, you are such a tease to poor Mr. Rackham. You will make him quite embarrassed."

"No, ma'am," I protested, "you do me honor, and I thank you for your observations."

With the introductions complete, we adjourned to the dining room.

"Charles," said Mrs. Goodson questioningly to her husband,
"where is Cynthia?"

"How would I know?" he said acerbically. "The delays that women create are a mystery to me. If I ran my business like women meet their appointments, we'd have been bankrupt years ago." He laughed heartily, and Mr. Trubshaw attempted to do likewise but his nervousness got the better of him and he grinned instead.

"Really, Charles, it's too much that you should turn everything I say into a joke. I'll go and see myself."

Before Mrs. Goodson had time to explain why their daughter was late, Cynthia appeared in the doorway of the dining room.

"Oh, I do hope I haven't caused any trouble by being just a little late." She looked at each of us as she spoke as if beseeching our forgiveness.

Mr. Goodson was reticent to forgive her that easily.

"Good God, Cynthia, why must you be late for everything? You've had all day to get ready."

"Oh, Papa, don't be such a grumbler. I'm sure you're the only one who's upset. I'm certain Mr. Rackham is not irritated at my lateness, are you, Mr. Rackham?"

As she addressed me, she inclined her head slightly as if she were playing a little game with me.

"Indeed, no, Miss Goodson. Your presence under any circumstances would be enchanting. I'm afraid that I was
unaware of your being at 'Landsdon Place.' I had thought you were at boarding school. Your being here can only add to the evening's pleasure."

I was stopped from becoming unduly verbose on the subject of Cynthia Goodson's arrival by Mr. Goodson.

"Bravo, young Daniel! Well handled. Now, let's go to the table. There will be plenty of time for getting to know each other once we're seated."

Mr. Goodson sat at the head of the large oak table, and his wife sat at the opposite end. I was seated next to Miss Calhoun and opposite Mr. Trubshaw and Cynthia Goodson. As we began to eat, I looked, as occasionally as formality allowed for, at Cynthia Goodson. Everytime I did so, she would look confidently into my eyes and cause me to look away with embarrassment. I felt foolish being so easily intimidated by a girl six years my junior.

Cynthia was an attractive girl. She was not what is normally described as beautiful. One was attracted to this girl in a way which superceded beauty. No doubt the embarrassment I suffered at her hands was largely caused by my motives for looking at her. I felt guilty because my furtive glances at her were not honest. It was as though I were stealing something from her being.

"Mr. Rackham, how do you like Lancashire?" Cynthia asked the question in such a way as to make one believe that she
was still playing some kind of game, the rules of which I was unaware.

I looked around the table and saw that Mr. Goodson was lecturing Mr. Trubshaw on the benefits of mechanization. On the other side, Mrs. Goodson and Miss Calhoun were avidly discussing some new scheme to save the poor. The symmetry of the table and its occupants caused Cynthia and myself to be thrown together conversationally.

"It is certainly different to London, Miss Goodson."

I tried to avoid revealing my true feelings about the place.

"In what ways, Daniel?" She emphasized the word 'Daniel' as if to taunt me to better her forwardness.

"In every way. The people, the climate, the landscape, the culture, just about everything you can think of. It would, I fear, be much the same as pointing out the differences between an elephant and a frog. The obvious differences preclude the necessity of further description."

"Well, that's all very good. Which is Lancashire, the frog or the elephant?"

"I fear I'm trapped for both have connotations which would do an inhabitant of Lancashire such as yourself grave injustice."

"Do you find me pretty?"

The sudden change of topic caught me completely unawares, and I was only able to utter the word 'yes'.
"Why, thank you, Daniel. I find you very handsome, too."

I looked around the table, feeling sure everyone would be listening, but it was clear that they were too engrossed in their own conversation to pay any attention to their daughter’s flirtations.

"Oh, don't worry about them. They'll not hear us. Poor Father is far too involved in boring Mr. Trubshaw, and Mother is busily trying to work her way to heaven by discussing the poor."

"Well, I must say that you have certainly improved my opinion of Lancashire."

"Oh, my. Do go on, tell me in what way."

I stumbled, wishing I hadn't begun what she'd forced me to finish.

"What I meant was that you are considerably more lively than the sum of all the other things I've seen in Bolton so far."

"I don't know whether to take that as a compliment or not. After all, frogs are lively. They jump around all day."

Cynthia Goodson tilted her head to one side and looked at me until she finally drew an answer from me.

"Miss Goodson."

"Cynthia, please, Daniel."

"Very well, Cynthia. What I was suggesting was that you are like an oasis in the desert."
"But not a mirage, I hope, Daniel."

"Indeed, I hope not, otherwise I may not last my time in the desert."

Mr. Goodson quite suddenly stopped his lecture to the patient Trubshaw and asked what sweet nothings we were discussing. I assured him that we were just discussing my trip. Cynthia proceeded to destroy this answer by informing her father that we were discussing private, intimate details which were no concern of his. Goodson smiled ingratiatingly at this daughter and recommenced his sermonizing to the unfortunately placed Trubshaw.

"See how lucky you are not having to sit by papa. He's dreadfully boring when he begins his speech on mechanization. You should be thankful you can sit opposite me. Of course, I arranged the whole thing so you can thank me."

"I am honored that you went to such trouble as to arrange the logistics of such a thing." I spoke somewhat sarcastically.

"Well, if you mean it, why don't you be gallant and accompany me to the drawing room. It's more cozy in there, and we won't be distracted by my father and mother."

"Won't they think it rude of us to leave the table?"

"No. Why should they? We've finished eating, and I don't see why we should have to put up with their silly, boring conversations. Come, let's go."
Before I could speak, Cynthia had risen and was already half way to the door. I made my apologies as quickly as possible and followed.

Cynthia Goodson was a girl of medium height and medium build. She was, according to most criteria, undistinguished. And yet there was something about her which was provocative and at the same time disarming. She was at once childish and womanly. She had at the age of 18 captured the spirit of youth with the allurement of a woman. I imagined that both her parents were at her mercy whenever she wished, subjected to her caprices and tantrums alike.

"Well, Daniel, do you like to be alone with me?"

We stood on the large Persian rug which lay before the open fire. As she spoke, the light from the fire flashed around her hair and neck, creating a kind of aura about her.

"I cannot imagine anything quite as pleasant. I trust that you are also pleased to be alone with me."

"Of course I am, Daniel. You can't imagine how dreary it is here being surrounded by oafs for suiters. You are so much more handsome and sophisticated than they are. I wish you could stay longer so that we could to things together."

"Much as I would relish that thought, I'm afraid I do have affairs to tend to in London," I lied.

"I know you don't really want to stay. You're just
pretending. You find us all primitive and ignorant."
She retorted poutily.

"Indeed, I do not, Cynthia. I find you to be far from
primitive or ignorant. You are more that a match for most
twice your age whether they dwell in London or Lancashire."

"Do you really mean it?"

"With all my heart."

"In that case, come and kiss me."
The unexpected ease with which Cynthia Goodson framed
her demand left me speechless.

"Well, why don't you? Am I too ugly?"

"No, no, you are certainly not that. But what of your
family? They might come in at any moment."
The low noise of the conversation continued to emanate
from the dining room.

"And besides, we hardly know each other."

"Daniel, don't be such a coward. They won't come in,
and as far as not knowing each other, it seems we never
will if you are to be rushing off to London so soon. So
will you or won't you? You have no excuses left."
The appeal of kissing Cynthia grew on me second by
second, and her words of persuasion made me know I would. I
moved towards her and kissed her gently on the cheek. As
I did so, she pulled closer and embraced me tightly. Our
lips met, and I closed my eyes as we kissed.
CHAPTER FOUR

It had been two days since I'd first kissed Cynthia Goodson, and one day since I'd last kissed her. She had distracted me from my responsibilities, and I'd failed to learn anything of the business as my uncle's lawyers had intended. Instead, I'd wiled away my time walking in the surrounding countryside with the mill owner's daughter. She was like a breath of warm Mediterranean air in this frigid landscape, and her vivaciousness gave me an unexpected renewed interest in life. I did not love her but was enchanted by her youthful exuberance and carefree spirit. Nothing seemed to daunt her moments of pleasure, not even my soon departure. She lived the moment to its full, draining it of every drop of pleasure. It was just as well that I was leaving, I considered, for had I stayed longer I fear she would have drained me of all she needed and, like some faddish toy, I'd have soon become tiresome. Her desire for pleasure was matched by her need to give of herself. Indeed, the affair was most successful and not at all painful.
Hardcastle entered the study, which I had been using as a kind of temporary den, and produced two letters. One was a hand-delivered note from Cynthia Goodson. It was one of those missives which had no particular purpose other than to create pleasure in the heart of the reader. Cynthia, in her open-hearted way, said that she missed me and desired to know when we'd meet again. I put the letter down on a small occasional table and proceeded to investigate the other letter. It was London postmarked, and I hoped it was from Acton Lister. Indeed, it was. I began to read.

"Dear Daniel,

How tiresome of you, dear boy, to flee the promised land so hastily. Most make their pilgrimage towards paradise, and yet you willfully leave it for the barbaric wastelands of Lancashire. I suspect your trip reflects either stupidity or a previously unrecognized resilience to suffering.

Alas, your departure has quite deterred me from painting. I've had no interest in the tiresome occupation since you left. No doubt you are unconcerned with my plight as your own must seem infinitely worse.

You remember, I'm sure, our little rendezvous at the restaurant. Well, the truth is, I've capitulated to my mad passion for Alicia LaFelice. I have persuaded the beguiling creature to sit for me. Alas, I'm unable to even touch brush to paint. The magnificence of her beauty
combined with your absence has destroyed me. You must return home immediately if I am to be saved at all.

I will refrain from divulging any further information on dear divine Alicia, trusting that your curiosity will spur you back to London.

There is little to say of note about anything else, save that Lord Greerson and Sir Daniel Hinton are refusing to acknowledge my existence at the club. I can't say the prospect upsets me much. They were a trying brace of bores at the best of times.

And what of yourself. What has become of you? No doubt you have become the paradigm of mercantile respectability. Mills...ah, the thought depresses me horribly. How can you possibly allow yourself to be related to an uncle in such a ghastly business? I fear for your education, Daniel, lest it be totally undone by this untimely trip. Pay attention not to heed the praises of hard work and such nonsense. Hard work is for those poor unfortunates who are capable of nothing else whereas you, Daniel, with the correct guidance, will be eminently suited to quite a different existence.

Avoiding hard work and poverty is, for most, impossible. You have been given a gift. Don't abuse it by seeking to justify it by toiling away in the world of labor. Stand true to the principles of leisure, pleasure,
and gratification.

Well, I fear I've preached enough on this subject, so I will allow the truth of my words to sink in. I shall be eagerly awaiting your return whereupon I shall introduce you to Miss LaFelice.

Your concerned friend,

Acton Lister"

Even if I had changed under the influence of Lancashire, I rested assured that Lister was just the same. His letter brought back into my mind the figure of Alicia LaFelice. He had obviously magnetically drawn her to himself and was now enjoying the pleasure of her close proximity. My thoughts on the subject became clouded and more difficult to understand as I contemplated the two of them in Lister's studio. Perhaps by now they were already promised to be married. No, the idea was absurd. I misjudged the character of Acton Lister by ever imagining such a thing. I believed that he was madly in love with Miss LaFelice, but I'm sure that love and marriage did not occupy the same road in Lister's travels. It would indeed be fascinating to lie back on Lister's couch and watch the two of them. It would be an education in itself. Perhaps she, too, was a creature with no soul. Two soulless bodies in hedonistic pursuit of life. The idea was marvelous.

I decided to manipulate the future no further; after
all, what was the point of knowing something before it happened? It would ruin the education completely.

Today would be my most difficult day in Bolton, for I had been invited to join Mr. Goodson at the weekly chamber of commerce lunch. The subject of the meeting reminded me that it was already 11:00. The idea of dining with a room full of Mr. Goodson's fellow tradesmen was such that I was unable to do anything but wish I'd been born in another age. Mr. Goodson's assurances that they were a good set of men did little to discourage me from my desire for another life. It did occur to me, however, that one should be thankful for small mercies, for at least I wouldn't have to enter into pleasantries with the wives of these men. It was little compensation, but it was enough to encourage me towards some form of positive action concerning the event.

Hardcastle, in his wisdom, selected the clothes I should wear. It was, I pondered, one of those occasions where one might easily be overdressed.

"Sir, I'm sure these will not offend in the slightest way and will endear you to the gentlemen as one of their comrades."

Hardcastle was referring to a brown worsted jacket, which was in the process of being brushed, and a similar pair of trousers.
"These seem a trifle rustic to me, Hardcastle. Are you sure I'll not end up looking the perfect fool?"

"Indeed, they are as you observed 'a little rustic' and thus will make you the model of conformity."

"A sort of archetypal northern businessman, eh?"

"Yes indeed, sir."

He was not impressed with my wit. I could tell.

"And how exactly do you know all these things, Hardcastle? Have you ever been to such an event?"

"Certainly not, sir." He seemed offended at the very idea. "However, I am not totally ignorant of the habits and predilections of that class of people." He pronounced the words 'that class of people' with a definite tone of derision.

"Why, Hardcastle, I do believe you suffer as much a feeling of revulsion towards the luncheon engagement as I do."

"I hope I did not imply anything..."

"Don't deny it, Hardcastle, you find them squalid, don't you?"

"Well, sir, the thing is, they don't appear to have any of the sensibilities and graces which one usually associates with the gentry. I hope I don't speak out of turn, sir."

"Indeed, you don't. They are, I fear, a terribly
common lot - smoking their fat cigars and squabbling about the price of cotton - it's all very sordid, I admit."

Hardcastle, as I'd always suspected, was in fact a frightful snob. Still, I did envy his position right now as it was I, not him, who was about to be thrown in with these farmers and shopkeepers.

Our comments on the members of Bolton chamber of commerce were terminated by my need to get dressed and be off. I stood resplendent before the bedroom mirror and looked at Daniel Rackham in his new clothes. Already I was beginning to look like a younger version of Mr. Goodson. All I needed was the red face and balding pate, and the picture would be complete. The thought of such a fate could barely stop me from tearing off the wretched vestments. Not wishing to damage a rather well-cut jacket, I managed to resist the urge and continue preparing for the event.

Mr. Goodson arrived at the house to pick me up smoking a large cigar. It bode ill, I thought, for the predictability of the whole affair. Perhaps I should begin smoking a cigar and then the downfall would be complete.

As we drove towards the center of Bolton, Goodson discussed - lectured would be a better word - on the subject of the membership of the Bolton chamber of commerce. By the time we approached the town hall, I felt as if I'd already been through the ordeal that was about to begin.
We arrived sufficiently early to allow us to take a drink before the lunch began. As we mingled with the pre-lunch drinkers, Goodson introduced me to a number of his acquaintances. Without exception, they shook hands fiercely with me and congratulated me on the inheritance of the two mills. It was, it seemed, the mills which bestowed upon me acceptability. These men cared little for individual characteristics just so long as one was involved in the process of buying and selling. After having been told by a number of gentlemen about my excellent prospects if I worked hard, I was relieved to hear the announcement that lunch was served. At this signal, the entire collection of gentlemen made a head-long dash for the dining room. Ah, I thought to myself, Hardcastle was right about his assertions concerning these gentlemen. Like pigs rushing down a chute, they jostled and pushed. After what seemed a very long time, each honorable member of the chamber of commerce managed to find his respective seat.

I found myself between the bulky form of Goodson and the even more bulky form of George Marston. He was, as I had discovered when I was introduced to him five minutes earlier, a manufacturer of railway engine parts. I thought vainly for subjects of conversation which I could encourage the gentleman in. Not a single subject crossed my mind, and I began to think that very soon Mr. Marston would
begin to lecture me on his chosen profession.

Before Mr. Marston had time to think about my potential as an eager listener, I was verbally pounced upon by a fellow sitting directly opposite me. He eyed me suspiciously and then began stalking me, waiting for the chance to strike.

"Your uncle was a very able businessman. I trust you'll be at least half as good yourself."

"I'm afraid I've little experience in business as you are probably aware. Forgive me, I don't know your name."

"Ah, I expect ya don't, being so new to town. Well, my name's Andrew Thistlewright and most folks, gentlemen that is, have heard of me round here."

"Well, I'm afraid I must apologize for my ignorance of your fame, but I fear the name is less well-known in London."

The obvious sarcasm in my voice was noticed by even Mr. Thistlewright.

"Ay, you may be right there, but you'll see one day that I'll be known in London well enough. Allow me to explain my profession. I am the inventor, designer, producer, and retailer of the 'Thistlewright luxury flushing lavatory.'"

It was all that I could do to avoid exploding. I could feel an enormous burst of laughter building up in my stomach. Here I was opposite this poker-faced fellow who described without so much as a grin his occupation. It suddenly occurred to me how lucky I was that Alfred Pitson was my
uncle and not Andrew Thistlewright. I could just see myself being introduced at dinner parties as the owner of a lavatory manufacturing empire.

The arrival of the soup caused sufficient diversion for me to overcome my desire to laugh hysterically. Throughout the meal, I continued to make small talk with all those I was close enough along the table to be able to talk with. There was a paintmaker, a foundry owner, a mineowner, and, rather more interestingly, a publisher. Of the choice, the publisher appeared to have most potential, and he expressed least interest in trying to convey to me every aspect of his business. He also had the appearance of having moved to Lancashire rather than having been born there. Mr. Albright even looked different to the other members. He wore a light grey suit which appeared (unlike everyone else's) to have been made specifically to fit the gentleman wearing it. Albright was a distinguished looking gentleman who looked like he set foot in an office but rarely. He seemed, on reflection, to be totally unsuitable for membership of such an organization. When he spoke, his words were colored with the quiet confidence of those who do not feel it necessary to ram everything down everyone else's throat. He stood out as being an educated man, a man with a sense of refinement. I wondered what circumstances had reduced him to toil. My question was answered by Mr. Goodson,
who'd observed my perusal of Albright. He attempted to whisper into my ear a potted history of the said gentleman. It turned out that he was indeed well-educated and that his father was wealthy. Wealthy, that is, until he invested unwisely and lost everything. Albright was then thrown upon the resourcefulness of his ability.

Goodson's synopsis of the situation ended by his maintaining that the family's demise was a good thing, otherwise Albright may never have become involved in business. He held that it was a funny sort of business and not his own choice, but at least Albright was doing something useful and doing quite nicely at the same time. He then went on to say in a considerably louder voice that there were too many idle rich in places such as London and that a bit of hard work would help people respect money a bit more.

The sermon was interrupted by the arrival of the roast-beef, Yorkshire pudding, and roast potatoes. A hush fell upon the room as with one accord the honorable members fell upon their food. I welcomed the silence that the food afforded. I sipped at the surprisingly passable claret and began to eat.

As I ate, I reflected on my predicament as the heir of my uncle. There was no way I could be induced to exist in Bolton. The weekly attendance of such luncheons as this was sufficient by itself to deter me from even contem-
plating the idea. Somehow, I must rid myself of the respon-
sibility for the mills and thus ensure my escape from this
kind of life. I decided to give up my plotting and concen-
trate on eating. With my head down and utensils busy, I
was sure I was less likely to be preached at or lectured
to.

The silence which was precipitated by the task of eating
lasted until the last morsel was consumed. Then, as before,
the hubbub of noise increased until one could not readily
discern any particular words. Occasionally, the odd phrase
filtered across the table, and I was able to rest in the
knowledge that the topic of conversation was still revol-
vving around the intricacies of profit and loss.

It was while I was feeling like a drowning man in an
ocean full of sharks that I was approached by one of the
butlers.

"Sir, there is a lady waiting outside. I believe she
wishes to speak to you."

"A lady for me? Are you sure?"

"Indeed, I am sure."

"Well, who is she?"

"I believe," he began to whisper more quietly and leaned
over my shoulder a little more, "she is Mr. Goodson's
daughter."

I quickly glanced at Goodson and noted his preoccupation
with the fellow on his other side.

"Very well, tell the lady I shall join her in a minute."

What on earth could Cynthia want at a time like this, I thought questioningly. I tried to ease myself as unobtru­sively as possible from the table in order to make my escape. No matter what the reason for my summons, it could not be more miserable than the possibility of remaining in the room for another minute. As I extricated myself from the world of the tradesman, I began to warm at the idea of meeting Cynthia Goodson.

The butler led me to a vestibule attached to the foyer of the townhall. There standing before me was Cynthia. She was dressed in a pink dress which seemed to positively deny the reality of the weather. Her face, as always, was filled with impish fervor, and her smile encouraged me to walk up to her with a pace which verged on haste.

"Dear Cynthia, what in heavens name is the matter?"

"Oh, Daniel, don't be alarmed. There is no need to look so flustered. Nothing is the matter whatsoever."

"Then why have you come here now?"

My question came out rather more coldly than I intended.

"Why, Daniel, you're cross at me, aren't you? I shall go away immediately for I see that I have offended you."

"No, no. Dear Cynthia, you have not offended me at all. Indeed, I must admit to being overjoyed at being
able to talk to you rather than all those clammering, hard-headed tradesmen."

"Well, then you should be grateful that I rescued you from them."

"Indeed, I am."

"Then follow me. I know a perfectly delightful coffee house just a little way from here. I have a carriage waiting, so you have no excuse."

"But what of your father? He'll wonder where I am."

"Oh, do hush, Daniel. I swear, you're such a worrier. Papa won't even notice you've gone."

With Cynthia's last word on the subject, we departed for the said establishment. It was a rather pleasant though homely affair, and we sat and drank tea for about an hour. Cynthia Goodson was, I decided, a remarkable girl for her 18 years. She was a charming companion whose confidence with rules and etiquette allowed her to break them whenever she desired with the most appealing results. Had her father or mother attempted the same (most likely inadvertently), the result would have been embarrassing. But Cynthia's sublime use of the moment allowed her to rise above social convention. The girl did appeal to me, but perhaps that was only because I was leaving in two days.

The subject of leaving reminded me that I was still duty-bound to visit the other Pitson mill. I had also been
reminded by Hardcastle that tomorrow I must pay a visit to the local firm of lawyers who were subconded by Jamieson and Cartwright. The idea of visiting lawyers, bad enough in itself, was made more depressing by the thought of their detailed knowledge of the mills and various properties. They would, I feared, fill my head with pertinent facts and figures relating to the mills and demand to know my opinions on all kinds of matters of which I had no knowledge whatsoever.

After tea Cynthia had some appointments to attend, so I made my way back to the townhall. To my surprise, most of the diners were still there. They had, of course, vacated the dining area and were now engaged in drinking and a continuation of whatever they were talking about when I left. I joined the throng, seeking out Mr. Goodson. Eventually, I spied his pink pate and headed towards it.

"Ah, Daniel, where in the devil have you been? We thought you'd been kidnapped."

His supposition was not far from the truth, I considered.

"Anyway, you're back now, so let me introduce you to Hodgeson, the biggest sheep farmer in the area."

Mr. Hodgeson was every inch a farmer from his great rough hands clutching at his glass to his great broad, solid face. I attempted to ask him how sheep were these days. Before I'd finished my question, he began to bemoan the tragedy of being a farmer. Like the few farmers I'd
met. Hodgeson felt that the whole world was conspiring against him. If it wasn't the weather, it was the politicians, and if it wasn't them then it was the footrot. The effects of the latter he described to me in by no means pleasant terms. On considering the misery of the farmers' lot, one could only marvel at how they could afford to occupy such huge houses and have such fine carriages.

Eventually, Goodson and Hodgeson exhausted the subjects of which they had mutual interest, and we were able to leave. As we did so, Goodson suggested that I come straight round his house, and we'd have a nice long chat. I assured him that while I would love to, I was unable to due to being sorely exhausted by the responsibility of my late uncle's estate. He seemed to accept this excuse, acknowledging that it was indeed a grave responsibility, and he would hinder me no further.

The peace and quiet of my uncle's house was refreshing after the hectic afternoon I'd spent. I took up the paper and entered the study in order to read. Once again, my intention was foiled by the roaring warmth of the fire and by the comfort of the Chesterfield. No sooner had I sat down and began reading than I fell asleep.

It was dark outside when I awoke, and I got up to close the curtains. The sky was clear of clouds, but the stars and thin moon did little to illuminate the garden.
All around it was black, as though nothing existed beyond the window.

Hardcastle entered the room and enquired of my afternoon. I assured him of its merits and faults, and he commiserated with me. I decided not to eat supper as the hearty fare of the tradesmen's lunch had been a little too much for one day. I informed Hardcastle that due to the strenuous nature of the day's activity, I would be retiring early.

"Are you not feeling well, sir?"

"I am feeling as well as can be expected after such a day, but apart from that I am suffering from nothing which a good night's sleep wouldn't cure."

After selecting a suitable tome from the bookcases, I retired to my bedroom. I had read but little before I was overcome by my earlier feeling of drowsiness.

* * *

My last two days in Bolton passed with a kind of acceptability which was only such because they were the last rather than the first. They were the busiest days of the entire trip. Business and duty called upon me to pay more attention than I had previously done. Cynthia Goodson had become insistent on my spending time with her which was well enough except that I was trying to compress all the appointments of the week into two days. Eventually, of course,
I had managed to do everything that was necessary and felt a vague sense of satisfaction at actually having undertaken the ordeal and completing it relatively successfully.

On the morning of our departure and return to London, the Pitson household resembled Hogarth's depiction of bedlam. Hardcastle was the only one of us who maintained his usual stately calm. He went about, empirically giving instructions to all and sundry. The net result of this chaos was the surprisingly speedy and efficient packing of our bags and dispatch of ourselves and the baggage to Bolton Railway Station.

Upon arrival at the brick buildings of Bolton Station, I saw Cynthia Goodson, her muffler pulled high around her neck as she was standing by her carriage.

"Cynthia, why you'll catch your death of cold standing there. What on earth are you doing?"

"I have come to wave you off, Daniel. It is not befitting that you depart with no one to leave behind tearfully waving you off into the distance." She said the words with a slight hint of a smile on her mouth, as if she were still playing a game with me.

"Well, I'm overwhelmed by your thoughtfulness. It is really jolly nice of you."

"Yes, you're right, it is. So be nice to me. Stand and talk with me for awhile before you finally disappear
forever."

"There's no need to be so final, Cynthia. I will probably be coming up here regularly once I own the mills, and we can write to each other."

"Somehow, Daniel, I know that you won't be coming back up here. I know you don't like it here, and you hate the business. Perhaps, who knows, you won't even inherit the mills at all. Six months is an awfully long time to have to wait for anything, especially an inheritance."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. It's just a feeling I have. As for writing, you'll soon forget me once you return to London. It would only be a burden on you. Writing is useless anyway. It never conveys what one wants to say and is liable to all kinds of misconstrue. Life is too fast for letters. Letters are for business and to inform of births, marriages, and deaths."

She did indeed have a point about writing, but I failed to see what she meant concerning my never returning. I was unable to divine anything further on the subject as Hardcastle marched up and informed me that the train would be leaving in four minutes. The man's sense of accuracy seemed out of place at this time of emotion.

We embraced for most of the remaining four minutes, and finally I climbed onto the train. I stood by the door,
leaning out of the open window. As I looked into Cynthia's eyes, I thought how different my departure was to my arrival. The cold sky was clear and bright this morning, and the station platform was bathed in the pale sunshine of winter. There amongst the other people of the platform stood the brightest star I'd seen in all my trip. Even in the sunshine, her bright features shone with a light of their own. She was so pure and guileless, a perfect creature seeking perfect happiness in every moment of her life.

Finally, the train began to move, and I touched her hand for the final time. As the train's speed increased, her fingers slipped through mine until only the tips touched, and finally we touched no longer. I waved sadly as she grew smaller every second until at last she merged in with the mass of humanity standing on the platform. It was odd that at such a distance even the brightest star blends in with all the lesser stars until at last it is indistinguishable from them. How small she'd seem by the time I reached London. Perhaps by then she'd be lost in every way, even in memory.

I located Hardcastle in our carriage and sat down with the prospect of a long, uninteresting journey ahead. The trip did not end by my physically leaving Bolton; during the entire journey I mused over its pleasures and its less
pleasurable moments. Many things had happened during that week, things outside of my experience. I had gone to Lancashire with an ignorant dislike of the place. I was leaving having seen what before I could only see through the eye of prejudice.

Not everything I recounted was as pleasant as my time spent with Cynthia or the afternoon hours I wiled away in the study staring into the fire. I had seen the millworkers, the people from whose sweat I was able to make my money and live in ease and comfort. In contrast, they existed in a hopeless squallor from which they could never escape.

If I was ever to be happy in life then I would have to forget the faces of the machine operators. I would have to forget their houses and think only of the good things in life. I wondered how Acton Lister would react to what I'd seen in Lancashire. Surely he'd not be like the mill owners and insist that it was the way of things and that there was no other alternative. No doubt it was just how God had planned it, some people he made rich and some he made poor. The absurdity of the notion struck me with great force as I looked out at God's creation. The trees and white fields sped by with hardly a trace of existence once they'd passed from view. Perhaps everything I'd seen would also pass by and be left with hardly a memory.
In some ways, I hoped it would not as I wished to use the experience, feed on it and absorb it until it became part of me. On the other hand, I hoped it would be lost to my memory. Surely it was better not to remember life's unpleasantness unless one was determined to live a miserably unhappy existence.

I decided I would neither consciously forget nor consciously remember. I would allow the experiences I had undergone to be whatever the fates would have them be. That way I could abdicate my responsibilities for a little longer.
CHAPTER FIVE

The first thing I noticed about being back in London was the noise. The street in which my lodgings were situated was far from busy, but it was considerably more noisy than the street in which my uncle's house was located. It was the sounds from the street which woke me at the early hour of eight o'clock the morning after my return home. It sounded to me like a carriage or cab was being driven around my bedroom every time one would pass by on the street below. Gone were the hooting owls and barking foxes of Lancashire. They were replaced by the sounds of the klaxons on the carriages and by tradesmen shouting at each other.

London was beginning to look a little less like paradise than I had imagined it when I was far away from it in Bolton. I sat up in bed and decided to get up earlier than I had anticipated. I opened the curtains a little, a job I rarely had the opportunity of doing as Hardcastle invariably got there first, and squinted out into the morning light. The sky was a kind of dirty slate gray, and it looked as
though it needed cleaning. However, it was neither raining nor foggy, and in fact the pavements and road were almost bone dry. The weather bode well for a little expedition later in the day, I pondered.

While I had been away, a number of letters had arrived. There were the usual business and legal letters and three or four invitations to social events. I scanned each one quickly to make sure that they were not of particular interest before throwing the whole pile on the bureau.

My rooms had a distinct lack of hospitality about them after the warm and comforting atmosphere of my uncle's house. It occurred to me that the servants who kept the house were in fact better off living there than I was living here. Of course, I did have the advantage of living where Hardcastle was; they did not.

No sooner had I spoken of the devil than he came into the study bearing a silver salver on which there appeared to be a note.

"Hardcastle, I must admire your determination to have us live at a respectable level."

"I beg your pardon, sir, I don't understand."

"Well, I mean, here we are living in rented rooms, and you produce a silver plate for the mail."

"It is my opinion, sir, that wealth has little to do with breeding, as the gentlemen in Lancashire demonstrated;
therefore, because you do not exactly have an excess of money, there is no need for us to appear to be without breeding."

"Well said, Hardcastle. You're absolutely right. Breeding and money, in our case, do not go hand in hand."

Meanwhile, I had quite forgotten the letter itself. "Anyway, Hardcastle, let's have the letter and see who wishes to have the pleasure of my company."

I hoped it was from Acton Lister, but my hopes were dashed by Hardcastle's interjection.

"The letter was delivered by Mr. Norton's footman, so one may deduce that it is from the younger Mr. Norton himself."

"Well, thank you for ruining my surprise, Hardcastle. I think that will be all for the moment."

Hardcastle strode slowly across the room and silently opened and closed the door as he left.

Edward Norton had been a friend of mine since I had been at boarding school. If the letter could not be from Acton Lister, then he was the person who I would prefer to hear from most. I had not seen Norton in a good while. He had travelled extensively around Europe, no doubt trying to turn himself into a well-rounded Renaissance man. We had attended the same college at Oxford, but unlike myself Norton had received a first. He was the type of
person who was good at everything. It was a marvel that we were friends at all since I was good at nothing. Despite his cleverness, Norton was a thoroughly good chap, and we'd remained friends through thick and thin. I was surprised to hear from him as I had imagined that he was still wandering around the Greek Islands or something similar.

As I read the letter, I discovered that he was indeed returned from his exploits and was residing with his parents. Apparently, the sudden death of his grandfather had demanded his return, so here he was. The purpose of the letter was to enquire as to my health and ask that I meet him at his club in St. James' for lunch. The fellow must have had no idea of my own journey, and it was lucky that he sent the invitation today and not before.

How peculiar it was that we had both gone exploring, he to the far reaches of Europe and I to darkest Lancashire. As usual, I had been outdone by Edward Norton. Everything I did always seemed to pale into insignificance next to his exploits. With another person, one might have felt jealous and insignificant; with Edward Norton, it simply seemed the natural order of things.

I determined I would meet Norton this very afternoon as he had asked. With this resolve, I sprung up from my seat and rang for Hardcastle. As if anticipating my call, he appeared almost instantaneously and asked if I
required him to deliver a message to Mr. Norton.

"Sometimes, Hardcastle, I fail to see why I need to speak, move, act or do anything at all. You always seem to anticipate what I'll do next."

"I don't mean to intrude, sir."

"No intrusion was felt, and yes, I do want you to deliver a message for me to Mr. Norton's abode."

I crossed over to the bureau and scribbled a note to Edward Norton declaring my intention to meet him at his club. Within a few minutes I heard the front door close, and Hardcastle was gone.

The day had begun to look a lot more interesting since the arrival of Norton's letter. The feeling of anticlimax which I had been suffering from disappeared as I contemplated the prospect of meeting my oldest friend. However, before I could embark on any luncheon appointment, I would have to attend to the pile of correspondences which lay before me. There were invitations to be answered and lawyers' demands to be met. No doubt Jamieson and Cartwright would require a full report on my trip to Bolton.

It was about an hour and a half later that I finally sealed the envelope of the last letter of reply. The task seemed to go on forever, and it had wearied me excessively. By the time I'd finished, I was unsure if I'd be in the right frame of mind to meet anyone. I rang for
Hardcastle who had returned some time ago and asked if he might lay out some clothes for me. With this taken care of, I tried to relax for a few minutes in order to improve my mood and to lose the headache which the task of writing had precipitated.

After some short while, I decided that I was in sufficient good humor to prepare to depart. It was nearly noon, and I had arranged to meet Edward at one o'clock. Under Hardcastle's supervision, I dressed and made my final preparations while he called a cab.

I was soon speeding along the Mall towards St. James'. The parkland on either side of the road lay in a rusted brown film of wet leaves, but already one could see the green of spring growth beginning to appear here and there. The weather was milder than I expected, and a number of people were taking the air strolling along the Mall. Occasionally, I would catch a glimpse of a horse and rider on one of the many paths that crisscrossed the tree-lined park. London was beginning to come alive. The observation filled me with nervous excitement, and I began, without knowing why, to look forward to the weeks ahead. Suddenly I began to actually relish the thought of dinner parties and musical evenings. I felt revitalized, as if a great weight had been removed from me. Such was my excitement that about a quarter mile from Edward Norton's
club I stopped the carriage, paid the driver and continued on foot. It was too good of a feeling to be held down in a cab. I needed to be out and feel the hint of spring in the air.

I walked down the leaf-littered pavement with long, loping steps that bespoke the feeling of joy I had unexpectedly developed. As I passed other walkers, I bade them good day in a manner which surpassed the normal meaningless gestures one usually adopts. All too soon I came upon the club. I was afraid that entering the building may stifle or even crush my new found exuberance. I compensated for this feeling by contemplating the pleasure I would receive upon meeting my old and trusted friend, Edward Norton.

I climbed up the steps to the imposing entrance and entered the foyer. I enquired as to Norton's whereabouts and was informed that he had yet to arrive but they were expecting me so I could enter the reading room and wait for him there. I was glad that the reading room had been selected as this was the silent area of all London clubs. It meant that I could rest in the safety of knowing that I wouldn't be involved in any conversation.

I was ushered into the said room and looked around for a chair. Looking for a seat is not an easy task in a private gentlemans' club. The problem isn't that there are insufficient seats but rather that one is afraid of
sitting in someone else's chair. Gentlemen take their clubs very seriously and accordingly many of the older, more traditional members regard their chairs in a similar way to the way in which an Englishman regards his home as his castle.

I eventually located a chair on the periphery of the main group of readers and was sure its occupation would cause little offense. Upon seating myself, I was approached by a butler who silently produced a number of papers for me to select from. I did so and began to read. It was not easy to concentrate on reading a newspaper when surrounded by twenty other people doing likewise. I gave up the pretense of reading and began to survey my surroundings.

The room in common with most gentlemen's clubs was a large, high-ceilinged affair with a number of groups of leather armchairs dotted about its floor. The walls, floor and ceiling were all covered in dark oak. The floor was of that typical style seen all over London. Its oak blocks were of such a shine that if it were not for the rugs and carpets which bedecked it, I fear half the aged clients of the club would have already killed themselves by slipping on its highly polished surface. In amongst the fine brown leather Chesterfields were placed a number of low tables which provided a resting place for drinks and reading material alike. The sombre colors of the floor, carpets, chairs, and
tables was further evidenced in the walls of the room. They were clad from floor to ceiling in rather fine, ornately carved oak panelling. Every recess and archway was similarly covered and the whole effect was one of reserved elegance.

One of the unfortunate side effects of this profusion of stained oak was that without artificial light the room would have remained in perpetual darkness no matter what the time of day. The leaded windows seemed oddly insignificant when compared to the size of the rest of the room. They were placed at such a height that one could not see out of them unless standing on tiptoe (something I refrained from doing). No doubt the venerable gentlemen within did not want to be distracted by anything outside. In common with libraries and schools, the room had obviously been designed to allow light in but not allow anything to detract from the purpose of the rooms existence which in this case was reading. Reading did not involve idly staring out of windows, therefore the temptation was removed from harms way.

Having fully perused the room, I noted the portraits which were placed at regular intervals around the walls. They were, as far as I could tell, the pictures of living and dead distinguished members. Some I recognized, some I didn't. Two of the paintings were definitely by Acton Lister's father, the academician, but I didn't recognize any as being by Lister himself.
Just as I was contemplating the portraits, an extremely decrepid butler approached me bearing a silver tray on which there resided a drink. He proffered the drink, and I took it and was about to thank him when I noticed his raised eyebrows. They denoted censure, and I remembered the rule of silence.

I sipped the rather fine glass of sherry and began to look around at my companions. A number of extremely aged members were dozing fitfully, their heads bowed as if they were still reading their papers. It occurred to me that a person might die in a place like this and the event not be noticed for some considerable time.

I was undoubtably by far the youngest person in the room. Most of the others looked more suitable for the House of Lords than any other occupation. Indeed, I was the only person present who did not have white hair. I began to feel somewhat out of place but remembered that Norton was a member here and he was my age. I wondered why on earth he'd be interested in being a member of this club. There were other clubs whose average age was considerable lower than this ones. Then I remembered that his father was a member and indeed his father before that. Being in a club was a hereditary matter. One could develop a great lineage if one tried hard for enough generations. I, of course, would have to be content to join one of the
more recently established clubs on Oxford Street since I had no hereditary credentials of any sort. My father had been neither rich enough nor in the country long enough to be a member of a club. The only club my uncle ever belonged to was in Bolton. No, it was a sure bet that I'd never be accepted in this club. I could just visualize their faces when I told them that my nearest relative had been in a club but that it was not exactly in London.

My musings on the subject were terminated by the rather noisy (noisy by the standards of this establishment) entrance of Edward Norton. As he approached, he gestured me to rise and return with him to the door. I did so willingly.

Edward Norton was just as I'd remembered him except that his hair had grown lighter and his skin darker. We shook hands vigorously; the stiff atmosphere of the entrance hall forebade anything more emotional.

"Dear Daniel, you are even more devilishly handsome than before. How on earth do you manage it?"

"Speak about yourself, Edward, not me. I've never seen anyone look as well as you do."

"Well, that's what happens when you spend six months idly lounging around in Italy and Greece. I can thoroughly recommend the experience, Daniel. Anyway, enough of this talk. We'll continue it while we eat."
I followed Edward Norton along a passageway until we entered the dining room. In contrast to the sombre reading room, the dining room was blazing with light. The room was in fact an addition to the back of the club. It was a kind of large conservatory constructed of metal and glass and was a kind of miniature "Crystal Palace." Out beyond the glass walls of the room were the ornamental gardens. There were no strollers today despite the improvement in the weather. On further consideration, I decided that very few of the people I'd seen in the reading room would be very capable of walking at all, never mind wandering around the gardens.

A waiter showed us to a table alongside the glass, and I began to survey the menu.

"So, Daniel, what on earth have you been up to? I'm completely out of the gossip so I'm afraid you'll have to put up with my ignorance."

"Actually, I've been up to very little. My allowance sees to that."

"Oh, yes, of course that's right. You have to wait until you're 25. Why couldn't your uncle make it 21 like every other rich relative?"

"Well, anyway, finance aside, or perhaps because of it, I've been on a trip to Lancashire to survey my inheritance."
"Well, I say, Daniel, it seems to me you've been far more daring in your travel than I."

"Mock me not, Edward! I can assure you it was not my idea. It was those damn fool lawyers."

"No, I was serious. I'm sure it was far less civilized than Greece. I mean after all, Greece did once rule the world. The same can hardly be said for Lancashire."

"Actually, it was not as bad as I imagined. I mean, the people were barbaric, at least the gentry were at any rate, but it did have some distractions."

"So, what kind of distractions, pray tell?"

I told him everything about Cynthia Goodson, and he was suitably impressed.

"Well, Daniel Rackham, it seems you are truly a man of the world."

"I'm sure my distractions will pale into insignificance next to the exotic tales you have to tell."

"Perhaps, but they must wait a while until we've ordered."

Having done so, we continued to discuss all that had happened to us while we had been parted. Eventually, we got around to reminiscing on our mutual past, and before long we were both transported back to those days at college. It was not until we began to recount the exploits of college life that I realized the full extent of our
comraderie and friendship. We had been almost inseparable, and yet here we were now having met for the first time in over a year. We decided that such a lengthy parting should not occur again, and with this in mind we determined to meet regularly and try to recapture the spirit of our halcyon days at college.

The lunch was most enjoyable; the smoked trout was perfect and the wine just right for the fish. Edward Norton was marvelous company, and by the end of our engagement I realized that we had spent over two hours talking and laughing and occasionally attracting the critical stares of some of the older diners. On these occasions, Edward smiled back at them and then carried on as if they didn't exist. The whole event was thoroughly enjoyable, and I was reticent to leave when Edward said he had to meet his father before four o'clock. I agreed to do so as long as he promised another meeting.

Just as I had given up our meeting for being over, Norton suggested that we take a walk along St. James up towards the mall. I was, of course, in full agreement and looked forward to the prospect. The weather was as I had left it, and so we set off across the road and into the park. We walked at a leisurely pace as though we both wished to prolong the time together.

London's parks are a joy to be in at any time of the
year, and they offer a relief for the great masses of that city. Even in darkest winter, the parks do not entirely lose their appeal; the great rows of elms stand firm against any of the fiercest attacks of winter. There is something distinctly permanent about trees, especially in a place such as London where fads and fashions give the whole city a feel of instability.

These oases also provide the only real chance to see all levels and classes of society at play and leisure. Nowhere else in England is it possible to see the rich and the poor walking and sitting almost as if they were together. It gave one a chance to be a human being rather than a member of a particular class or group.

My ramblings were terminated by Edward's recognition of my state.

"Daniel, you seem deep in thought. What profound truths are you formulating?"

I briefly summarized my thoughts for him.

"It is indeed true. England is such a rigid place that it barely leaves room for real life at all. We could do well to learn from other cultures where peoples lives are not restricted by such preconditions and concerns for class. One of the great though few advantages the foreigners have over us is their concern for life and not appearance. I spent two months in Italy and was at first
shocked by the way of things there. You can go into a cafe or bar in any part of Rome and sit down and drink. One does not need to be concerned with what kind of revellers are there, whether they are of the same status or not. The only criterion is the function of the establishment. You are all there to drink. On many occasions, I sat down and entered into conversation with complete strangers who by their dress and appearance were certainly not what we English would call suitable companions. However, I soon learned to forget my breeding and enjoy the experience."

"I envy you, Edward, for your experience. I wish that I could do something similar."

"Indeed you can, dear friend. Soon you will have the time and money, and I know you already have the inclination. Tell me about your trip to Lancashire."

Our walking pace had slowed considerably as we talked, and I felt as if we could walk and talk like this forever.

"Lancashire is an unhappy place in many ways; it is perhaps what we Londoners would prejudicially conceive it to be. But there is more to it than one can imagine by discussing it cynically after dinner at Lord Fothergill's house. Like London, it is a place of extremes, but extremes that exist in closer proximity to each other. That, unfortunately, is not to say that more communication exists because of that juxtaposition. Indeed, the opposite is
true. The gentry hold the masses in contempt. It is perhaps because of this proximity that the rich and poor are antagonistic towards one another. I suspect the likes of my uncle are somewhat insecure in their position. It must be a worrying experience to have ones wealth created by a group of people who receive little of the benefits of that wealth."

"There is a problem there, no doubt, and I fear that the future will not be an easy period for any of us. Things do not move at a fast enough pace for the radical elements of the masses, and yet they move too quickly for the established upper classes. Anyway, let's not ruin anymore of our stroll with this kind of talk; I fear we'll reach no conclusions and become miserable in the process."

"Yes, I think you're right. Besides, we have so much to catch up on that we need not dwell on the foreboding issue of the future. As my friend Acton Lister is always reminding me, life consists of this moment and not the next."

"He may have a good point there, but, Daniel, I was unaware that you knew Lister personally."

"I have been associated with him for a short time really, but I do find the man fascinating. He attracts me in a most inexplicable way. Of course, I know of his reputation, but it does little to deter my preoccupation
with his being. You should join me in visiting him one
day. He has the most marvelous studio; it makes one feel
as if one has been transported to another world. You
really must accompany me."

"I would love to dearly, but alas, Lister's name is
not exactly viewed favorably by my father. He has never
said why he dislikes Lister so much, but I fear it is
something which he cannot easily overcome. Perhaps if a
visit could be kept secret from papa then it could be
considered."

"Well, of course I wouldn't want you to do it if it
would cause trouble on the domestic front."

"I'm afraid I've done things which would have caused
more trouble with mama and papa had they been discovered,
so what harm could it do? Besides, I hear he has some
thoroughly unpleasant acquaintances which reportedly he
meets in the most atrocious dens. If the rumors be true,
then I couldn't possibly miss such a rendezvous."

"Then it's settled. I'll let you know as soon as
something is arranged."

The thought of introducing my best friend to Acton
Lister filled me with a feeling of pride. I wanted Lister
to thing well of me in every way, and introducing such
a worthy character as Edward Norton was sure to increase
his opinion of me.
As we continued our walk, I began, for the first time, to notice our fellow strollers. Up until this point, I'd been rather too involved in our discussion and had paid but scant attention to the surroundings. There was, as I had pondered earlier, a whole gamut of humanity taking the air on this late February afternoon. Like hibernating creatures, everyone appeared to have caught the smell of spring in the air. I suspect it was probably a false awakening and that the weather would turn worse again before it got better. Nevertheless, we, like our fellows, had caught a kind of infectious feeling from the air, and the only way for us to appreciate it was by experiencing it.

We passed by a pair of giggling shop girls, and I smiled broadly at them as we passed. The sounds of their giggles increased, and one muttered something to the other about my acknowledgment of them. Under normal circumstances, I would never have done such a thing, but today I forgot social graces and acted like a person. The feeling of oneness, a kinship with Edward, the park, and the other people therein was inexplicable, and yet I appreciated the sensation as it gave me a new sense of vitality. No doubt when I saw Lister and explained it to him he'd rationalize it and put it down to the triumph of optimism over experience. At the moment, however, that didn't matter as I strolled along at a leisurely pace beside
Norton. Nothing else in the world mattered except the moment.

All too soon we reached the end of St. James, and Edward Norton reluctantly called a cab and prepared to depart. I got the feeling that he did not want our time together to end anymore than I did, but the call of duty in the form of his father beckoned.

"Daniel, you must promise we will meet again soon. Our separation for so long must never reoccur, and we need to make up for the lost time. If it were possible, I would demand we spend every day together, but alas my father has it in mind for me to follow his footsteps in the persual of the stock exchange. Therefore he insists that I spend at least some part of every day in the process of learning the stock market. Consequently, I'm obliged to go to his offices and show my face. Of course, I try to make it a token visit rather than an opportunity to learn anything. If you find mills dull then you should try the stock exchange for awhile. Its lifelong ambition rests on the manipulation and maneuvering of things invisible. The only concrete evidence of its existence at all is the mood my father comes home in at the end of the day. If he's lost money, then he's in a damnable temper and one does well to ignore him. If, as he seems to do on occasion, he makes a killing, then he's a totally different person. My mother and I can do no wrong. Of course, I
try to save my accounts from the club and the various outfitters I use until those times. He waves them aside without so much as a glimmer of anguish."

"Well, however bad you make out the stock business to be, I shall prefer to be acquainted with the part of my inheritance that's in investments rather than the mills. Somehow investments seem less painful. One simply gets letters advising of their condition; running a mill involves a great deal of unpleasantness at every level."

"Perhaps you're right, but I'm afraid I don't have a minute longer to discuss the issue. I fear my father will already be fuming about my lateness. Believe me, Daniel, you're better off with no relatives at all. Anyway, enough is enough. I must be gone. Call me as soon as you are available."

Edward Norton climbed into his awaiting cab and drove off in the direction of the City. I suddenly felt all alone and wished I had someone, anyone, to talk to. I decided to walk a little further up the mall before catching a cab home. As I walked, Norton's last statement stuck in my mind and would not go away.

I wonder if I really was better off with no living relatives. It certainly had its advantages; one was almost entirely free to do as one pleased although my uncle had obviously tried to negate this advantage by the clauses
and conditions relating to the inheritance he bestowed upon me.

However, there must be disadvantages. One had no connection, no bond without family. I could easily see Norton's irritation with his father, but overall I suspect he would prefer it that way than having no family at all. Apart from the friends I made in the course of my life, I had no real connection with anyone. A family gave one a base, a place to return. Even prodigals were welcomed by their long lost families. Families have an empirical existence which can't be changed by circumstances. Friendships begin and quite often end; they are a product of one's effort. My brief relationship with Cynthia Goodson highlighted this fact. We were acquainted, we liked each other a great deal, and nothing unpleasant happened between us to cause our relationship to end, and yet already it existed only in the memory. It was no longer an actuality. Granted, we still liked each other, but our connection was severed; we were largely as if we were strangers. The thought of my conclusions quite subdued me, and I decided to end this line of thinking if at all possible.

In trying to occupy myself with other less unsettling thoughts, I remembered that I had promised myself a new hat. With this in mind, I determined to take a cab up to Jermyn Street and see if I could not occupy myself in
a hatter's establishment. It seemed a superior alternative to proceeding directly home. It was possible to walk to Jermyn Street, and I did enjoy walking as it was the only exercise I ever got. However, it was a little unseemly to walk so far. People might think I did it of necessity rather than out of interest. Aaton Lister had commented on my predilection for walking everywhere. He suggested that "walks taken for the purpose of leisure should have no other function. They should begin nowhere in particular and end nowhere at all." He added that "one should drive by carriage or at very least a phaeton to the place of commencement and one should arrange for the said means of conveyance to meet one at the conclusion of the activity."

Feeling the cynicism of Lister's denunciation of my wandering around London on business, I determined that I would take a cab that very instant. I don't know why I was so keen to observe Lister's rather unpredictable rules of behavior, but I did so anyway. Perhaps it was because they were so different to everybody else's. I preferred to apply myself to something not quite orthodox than commit myself to the conventions of the bulk of London's gentlemen. They, by their strict adherence to social convention, had become like lifeless manikins whose only qualities were the inability to be anything but predictable.
With this rebellious attitude in mind, I entered a cab and gave the driver the address on Jermyn Street. I spent most of the journey looking out of the cab windows. As we drew nearer Piccadilly, the number of people on the pavements increased. I wondered where they were all going and why they were going where ever they were going at all. If English society was different and I had more nerve, I would have liked to stop people on the street and enquire of their business and their destination.

As the traffic of cabs and carriages increased, I began to see the streets in a different light. All the gentlemen were travelling in their nearly identical cabs in parallel lines to and fro in orderly conveyance. On the pavements squeezed into the narrow margin, there moved the rest of society. They were the barrow boys, street urchins, butchers, shoppers, errand boys, and flower and watch sellers. They moved in a great chaotic swarm with only the edge of the pavement to restrict them at all.

"Guv'nor, we're here. This is the place you wanted, ain't it?"

Without realizing it, we had arrived at the destination and the cab driver was eyeing my glazed features with a look which was a cross between worry and irritation.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I was thinking about something else."

I was sure my explanation was of no concern or interest
to him, but I gave it anyway. I must have looked rather pale as he then proceeded to ask if I was feeling alright. I assured him I was and climbed out of the cab. Because of the preceeding incident, I felt bound to tip him more generously than my allowance allowed for. Somehow I felt it was my duty...and that I owed it to him. He looked at me asconse and touched his cap a number of times, conveying both surprise and pleasure at such a tip from a person who he no doubt had already categorized as a lower income gentleman. I thanked him unnecessarily for the ride and entered the venerable and long-established firm of Hawkins and Jones.

"Shop" is not really a suitable description for an establishment such as Hawkins and Jones. If it was possible, then this hatter's was more obsessed with its status than with any client who was likely to pass through its portals. The place was steeped in its own mythology to such an extent that its customers became secondary to its function.

Its function was to be the bastion of tradition and to uphold all the virtues that gentlemen look for in a shop but rarely find in a modern establishment. Buying something from the place was deeply ritualistic and almost mystical. The customer found himself in a similar position to that of taking the sacrament. Not altogether unsurprisingly, one found it to be a place of renown. It was the subject
of many a conversation over drinks or after dinner. Lords, viscounts, and those with knightwoods praised it unanimously and often cited it as a reason for the impossibility of something as vulgar as the French Revolution ever taking place in England. They comforted themselves with the notion that when all else failed, one could always rely on Hawkins and Jones.

I saw the matter in an entirely different light. In fact, it seemed to me that the very existence of such an establishment in the modern age was in great danger of precipitating the very revolution it was supposed to prevent. However, the plain fact of the matter was that Hawkins and Jones produced the finest hats in London. I personally, like many of the younger clientele, would have preferred a less rigorous procedure to buy a hat, but it was not to be so. I tolerated the snobbish conversation and manners of the shop assistants and fitters in order to get the best hat in London.

My attempt to buy a new hat was not altogether successful; in fact, it was an unmitigated failure. Not only did I fail to purchase a hat, I also contracted a frightful headache. Its existence was created entirely by the fact that for the last half hour I had been surrounded by as many as four assistants. Each one was doing something which, they assured me, was absolutely necessary although
I failed to see why.

The experience I had just endured and the headache it gave me caused me to give up any further attempts at business and return home forthwith. The day had been respectable up until now, but I feared it was a state which was finally lost during my visit to the hat shop. As I approached the door of my lodgings, I noted that the air had turned considerably colder, and I trusted that Hardcastle had noted this fact and had lit a fire accordingly. I entered the building, unsure of my pessimism or optimism concerning Hardcastle's firelighting.

I was, as always, relieved to find that I could rely on Hardcastle. Even the smallness of the fireplace could not dispel my happiness at finding it ablaze. I barely managed to get my coat off before I collapsed onto the divan which occupied the furthest end of the study. It was in this attitude that Hardcastle found me when he entered the room.

"Sir, is anything the matter? You look awfully exhausted."

"Hardcastle, you would not believe the excruciating experience I've just been through." I explained the events at the hatter's and Hardcastle commiserated with me, although I suspect that if the truth were known he sided with the veritable hatter's rather than myself.
I remained recumbent, unable to read the paper let alone do anything else more energetic, until Hardcastle brought in my supper. He had obviously divined that I was incapable of transferring myself to the dining room.

"Hardcastle, you are a saint. I don't think I have ever met anyone as attuned to another's misery as yourself."

"I was just trying to relieve you of some of the tiresomeness of living, sir."

It struck me as an odd thing for Hardcastle to say, and if I'd had more energy I would have asked him to explain in more detail. As it was, eating was an activity which consumed all of my sparse energy.

After eating, I felt a little more robust and decided to read the paper. This task being completed, I contemplated an activity in which I could absorb myself for the rest of the evening with a minimum of effort. My exhaustion incapacitated my powers of deduction, and I was only able to think of reading. I selected a rather unassuming and light early nineteenth century poetry volume and began to read. The task did not exceed me, and I determined to read until I could retire for an early night.
CHAPTER SIX

It was some days later before I was able to arrange a meeting with Acton Lister. I had a number of social engagements to attend including a visit to Norton's home where I dined with him and his parents. Lister had also been otherwise occupied. He had been asked, quite unexpectedly, he claimed, to provide a number of paintings for an exhibition. This genuine interest in his work sparked off a good deal of labor on his behalf. He finished previously unfinished paintings. He framed those which needed to be and generally busied himself with the task of setting everything in order for the exhibition. This rush of preparation was now completed, and Lister returned to his normal pace of existence.

I felt quite sorry for him when I discovered the effort he was making. The poor fellow was by his own admission totally unsuited to any kind of forced labor. Perhaps, on the other hand, it was a good thing as it would teach him to be more sympathetic to those who were in danger of
being permanently saddled with such activities.

Lister had sent round a note only this morning saying that he was now in a more acceptable mood to greet me. I inferred from this that up until that time he had been in a bad mood. The note insisted that I come to his house at two o'clock that very afternoon. I was able to meet his demands as I had nothing to do that day which might not be delayed until another time. Hardcastle was sent round to Lister's house with my reply and all was ready for our meeting.

As I thought of our soon-coming reunion, I began to develop an uncontrollable sense of fear. It was not a strong sensation but one which was deep-seated and persistent. I was unable to say why I felt this way. I hazarded a guess at its reason by suggesting to myself that our short separation would have changed everything between us. I had no reason to believe this other than the strange feeling in my stomach. Indeed, Lister's letter to me in Lancashire had almost begged my early return to London, and the note I received this morning contained a similar level of urgency in its tone.

Reflecting on the letter I received in Lancashire, I remembered, for the first time distinctly, Alicia LaFelice. Perhaps it was her I feared, not Acton Lister. Whatever the cause, I was sure to find out the truth of
the matter later in the day. With this conclusion in mind, I determined not to think on the matter further.

At half past one in the afternoon, Hardcastle called a cab and I began the journey to Lister's abode. Like all those who are confronted with danger before it occurs, I became surprisingly serene once I embarked on the long expected course of that danger. Thinking about something, I conjectured, is generally more unpleasant than actually doing it.

Before long, I caught a glimpse of Lister's white house. It seemed to stand out from those surrounding it. It was by no means the biggest or most elegant, but it seemed to beckon me towards itself. My experience in drawing nigh to its entrance was entirely different to that first occasion when I had walked in the rain. This time I was aware of what lay beyond the front door.

As I approached the door, the aged butler opened it before I could even ring the bell. He was obviously prepared for my arrival and did not have to shuffle in from the back and beyond of the house as he did the first time I visited. I addressed the fellow as cordially as possible and was surprised by his reply.

"I see, sir, that now it has ceased raining, you have decided to come by cab rather than on foot."

The fellow, despite his years, had remembered my
attempts to justify my walking in the rain to the house some three weeks earlier. I tried somewhat lamely to continue the game.

"Yes, well you see, my dear fellow, that when it's not raining in London, the atmosphere becomes very dry and is in consequence very bad for the complexion."

"Indeed, sir, I had not realized that," he answered with little more conviction than when I had addressed the subject three weeks earlier.

"Mr. Lister is waiting for your arrival in his studio and asked that you might follow me."

"Is Mr. Lister alone?" I asked somewhat nervously.

"I believe he is not, sir."

I decided not to enquire who he was with but to find out for myself. If it was a guest I would approve of, then knowing their identity beforehand could only dampen the surprise. If it was someone I did not wish to meet, then knowing so now would only increase the misery.

I followed the butler along the entrance hall and up the curling stairs. The man made such slow progress up the stairs that I found it took all my concentration to avoid overtaking him. Eventually, we reached the summit of the stairs and his pace increased a fraction on the flat ground of the passage way.

He knocked on the door to the studio, opened it, and
made way for me to enter. Upon my entrance, Lister bounded
towards me from the other end of the room. With surprising
speed, he reached me and we embraced warmly.

"My dear, dear Daniel, I was beginning to think you
had forsaken me forever. It is absolutely marvelous to
see you, and you look so well, especially considering your
ghastly exploits in darkest Lancashire. Why, I'm surprised
you haven't come back with scurvy and all matter of incurable
ailments. Come let me look at you." He took a pace back-
wards and surveyed me. Yes, indeed, you are still a
child of the gods, there is no other way to describe you.
Anyway, enough of this praise. What have you to say for
yourself?"

"I'm so overwhelmed by your welcome that I can scarcely
speak at all. Perhaps I should sit down and collect my
senses."

"How rude of me. Why, of course, sit down."

I sat down on the great soft couch which I had occupied
on my earlier visit. Acton Lister stood before me, beaming
with enthusiasm at my arrival. I was just about to ask
him about the exhibition when I remembered that the butler
said Lister had another guest. I surveyed the room for
the first time since my arrival and saw a female figure
with her back towards me standing in the shadows at the
end of the room looking out of the window. Lister noticed
my expression of confusion and without warning shouted out in an unnecessarily loud voice that made me start.

"Excellent!" With the utterance of this single word, the figure at the end of the room turned around and stood facing me. The top third of her body was still caught in shadow, and I strained to discern her more clearly. She wore a long, silk, light blue garment which appeared to be secured by a belt. She stood confidently aloof with one hand resting on her hip, the other preoccupied itself with holding a cigarette which was held in a long-stemmed holder. The smoke which curled up from the cigarette waved around her barely visible neck and head. Long tumbling chestnut hair fell in ringlets around her shoulders, blending with the coils of smoke. I knew in an instant who it was.

"Alicia, step forward and allow me to introduce you to my fair friend and student of learning, Daniel Rackham."

She moved towards me as if propelled by an unseen wave; she was the vision of pre-Raphaelite beauty. I swallowed loudly, attempting to guarantee the words I was about to utter would come out as I intended.

"Miss LaFelice, I am charmed and honored to make your acquaintance." As I spoke, her hand moved towards me. I took it and breathed her luscious scent as I kissed it.

"Acton has told me so much about you that I've been simply dying to meet you."
"Daniel, didn't I tell you she was just the most beautiful and enchanting creature on God's earth?"

Alicia LaFelice showed no sign of embarrassment at being discussed in such a way and she continued to stare boldly at me as if she were modeling the description Lister had given her. Sensing my own embarrassment, Lister broke the spell by drawing up a chair and suggesting all three of us sit down. As Miss LaFelice sat down opposite me, I could sense her limbs rippling and turning as the silk slipped and slid over her skin. She was naked underneath her gown and had obviously been sitting for a painting before I arrived.

"So, Daniel, what on earth have you been doing in Bolton for a whole week?"

Lister's question prompted me to pull my thoughts together and describe as briefly as possible the events of that week.

"Poor Mr. Rackham, it must have been dreadfully lonely for you in Lancashire, you being the only civilized person amongst all those horribly borish people."

I found it difficult to tell whether she was jesting with me or not but was saved from making a conclusion either way by Lister's interjection.

"Daniel is a very patient and long-suffering fellow, dear. He is not at all like you; he is capable of enduring
all sorts of trials."

"Is this true, Mr. Rackham? May I call you Daniel?"

"By all means do; I would be delighted."

"Then you must call me Alicia. But do tell me whether it's true that you can endure almost anything." She looked at me tauntingly. I quickly glanced at Lister and saw that he also waited upon my answer with expectancy.

"The fact is, Alicia, that some ordeals are rather more easier to endure than others. I have indeed lived through a whole week in Lancashire, but I doubt whether having met you I could endure the thought of this being our last meeting." I felt satisfied with my reply and looked directly into her eyes. For a second I thought I caught a slight flush creeping across her face, but my suspicion had no time to be proved before Acton Lister slapped my knee and shouted "Bravo!"

"This young man, Alicia, has grown bold while on his excursion. Perhaps Lancashire has done him some good after all."

"Indeed, Acton, it can have done him no harm for he can scarcely have been anymore perfect before his trip than he is now. You are very handsome, Daniel, do you know that?"

Now it was my turn to feel a flush rushing across my face, and I suspected the changing color of my cheeks was
noticeable to both my taunters.

"You mock me, ma'am," I answered, feeling as though I were the victim of them both.

"I do not or God strike me dead!"

The sound of such an oath coming from a woman alarmed me slightly, and I began to wonder what kind of person Alicia LaFelice was. Whoever she was, I decided, was unimportant. All I knew was that she was marvelous. Acton Lister eyed both of us with a kind of comical expression on his face.

"Perhaps you two beauties have overwhelmed each other for the moment. I suggest, Alicia, that you go and dress."

"Very well, Acton." She rose smoothly and stretched like a cat rising from sleep. She walked with a kind of sensual carelessness to the door and left Lister and I alone.

"Acton, she is the most intoxicating creature I have ever met. How on earth did you capture her?"

"Ah, Daniel, old men do not give up all their secrets to the young. Suffice it to say she is here and here she will stay for the present. I am glad that you find her attractive as I'm sure she feels the same about you. She is a most luxuriant creature, don't you agree? Like a black panther, perhaps. It takes courage, stealth, and cleverness to catch such a prize, Daniel, remember that."

I was unsure if Lister's words were meant as a warning
or simply as fact. Either way, it seemed she was a prize worth any price.

"I envy your power, Acton. You are so in control, I fear I should never be like that."

"You will, Daniel, you will. I intend for you to learn everything, but you cannot know it all now. You must wait and watch and prepare to strike." He spoke in an odd, almost wistful, tone which I had not recognized in him before. Much of what he said made little sense to me, and yet I felt he was talking of things which were soon to come to pass. As we continued our discussion alone, we gradually slipped into a closer, more natural relationship. Lister asked me many questions and advised me on issues as far apart as the Pitson mills and the second best place to purchase hats in London. I began to once again feel confident with our roles toward each other.

When my confidence was on the verge of being fully restored, Alicia LaFelice re-entered the room. She had dressed and wore a long-sleeved, high-necked pale pink cotton dress. By contrast with her earlier appearance, she now appeared virginal and coy. The only parts of her skin visible were her hands and face. Even her face was partially covered by the dark tresses of her hair. It was a strange transition and one which left me further confused as to what this creature was.
Lister continued his side of the conversation, paying but scant attention to Alicia as she sat silently next to him with her hand resting on his arm. All the time he spoke, she stared at me. It was no longer the look of the daring flirt; it was the look of a demure maiden. I found her presence rather distracting, to say the least, and could not fully enter the conversation Lister seemed intent of having with me. He seemed unaware of anything strange about Alicia's behavior, and I began to suspect that I was imagining it. With this in mind, I determined to ignore as much as was possible the presence of Alicia LaFelice. After some time, I became quite proficient at this task.

My afternoon in Acton Lister's studio was, I considered, a traumatic one and not one I would be able to put to rest anymore easily once it was over. A number of things puzzled me about the whole affair. I was unable to tell if the two of them were conspiring against me in some carefully conceived plot. If they were, what was the purpose? If they were not, then what exactly was happening? I desperately tried to decipher everything that happened this afternoon and used it to analyze Lister's relationship with Alicia. He was enamored by her beauty, it is true, but it seemed to me that she was somehow within his power. At the same time, I felt myself slipping under her influence. The resultant
picture was neither clear nor logical, but it appeared to exist all the same.

It was around the hour when Acton Lister normally took tea that Alicia told him that she must be leaving. He accepted the news with little surprise and agreed with her that indeed she must. She then proceeded to bid us goodbye. She kissed Lister on the cheek in much the same way as a daughter might do to her father. She then proceeded to approach me and shake my hand. The thought of her imminent departure depressed me unnecessarily, and I fear it may have showed in my rather melancholy farewell.

I stayed awhile longer with Lister, hoping to understand something more of his affair with this most uncommon woman. It was not to be. Lister was congenial and amusing, but I failed to draw him on the above subject. I finally recognized defeat and thought of leaving.

It was then that I noticed the canvass on the easel that for some reason I had not observed earlier. It was an exquisite though unfinished painting of a reclining nude female form. Despite its only partial completion, I discerned immediately that it was of Alicia.

"I see you have spilled my latest painting. In fact, it is not only my latest painting, it is my only painting. I'm afraid I consider all else that has gone before to be mere sketches. However, you must not judge it yet for it
is far from complete."

I moved closer to the easel, and Lister followed me as if to guard his precious work. The painting was not yet sufficiently advanced for it to have clearly defined solid features. Despite this fact and in spite of my artistic ignorance, I felt it already affected me, to an infinitely lesser extent, in the way that the creature that it represented did.

"I see, Daniel, that it has caught your imagination. That is good for I intend that only a special kind of individual will feel its attraction and power."

"It does indeed have something extraordinary about it. It is as though part of Alicia is clinging to your paint."

"An astute observation, Daniel. Perhaps you'll become an art critic."

He smiled sardonically as he spoke. I was not sure whether he was mocking what he would have considered to be the ignoble profession of the art critic or my attempts to aspire by my comments to the role of art critic.

"The effort of this endeavor has taken more out of me than you can imagine. I thought I had removed, by dint of effort, my soul from its body, but it would seem it is not so. I feel an intensity of suffering which is barely manageable." The tone of his voice altered and there
was a ring of unfamiliar heart felt truth in his words.

"But Acton, I had not realized. You seemed so in control when Alicia was present. You were master of us both, I would swear to it."

"Ah, yes, I see you do not yet fully understand. I said I was in great pain and the torment of it obsesses me. But I do not intend to lose and so I fight to overcome the enemy."

"But surely you do not mean Alicia is the enemy?"

"Perhaps, but it's not that simple as you will discover. When the elements battle for supremacy, one cannot easily see who is ally or enemy."

The words he spoke and the way he spoke them began to fill me with a kind of dread. It crept, without rule or guidance, along my whole being.

"I fear, Acton, that this afternoon has been a rather large and as yet incomprehensible step in my education. I will need time to ponder on all that has occurred."

"Yes, you're right and it's all my fault." As he spoke, his tone returned to its former confidence. "I must apologize for the way you've been treated. I fear I'm not a good teacher, or then again perhaps it is the lessons which are not good for you to learn."

"I don't believe either case to be true. In fact, I'm sure it is the fault of the student."
"How humble you are, Daniel, but it is unbecoming in one who has to do battle." He went on to quote Dante: "'When Cerberus, the great worm, perceived us, he opened his mouths and showed his tusks.' It is not a time for self-effaciveness; it is a time for action."

There was something chilling in his words, and I grew restless to leave lest I should be totally overcome by them.

* * *

During the journey home, I was unable to think anymore clearly on the subject of what had just transpired. My brain worked to overcome the confusion but only succeeded in producing an even more chaotic conglomeration of indecipherable thoughts. By the time I reached my lodgings, I was beginning to wonder if I were not going insane. If it had not been for the cabdriver's protests, I would have forgotten to pay the poor fellow. No doubt he believed I was deliberately avoiding payment. I had unwittingly furthered the notion held by the masses that the landed gentry are a bunch of miserly scoundrels who not only starve their employees but refuse to pay cab fares.

Hardcastle viewed me with suspicion as I entered the lodgings. He must have got the impression that I was a creature from bedlam. I rushed past him, quite unaware
of his existence, and flung the bedroom door open whereupon I leapt onto the bed. A few seconds later, Hardcastle stood motionless on threshold of the room.

You seem unduly perplexed, sir. Is there anything I can do to assist?"

"Hardcastle, your powers of understatement are remarkable. Here I am on the verge of insanity, and you suggest that I look perplexed."

Hardcastle obviously suspected the extent of my emotional state and decided the best thing to do was retreat. He closed the door behind him, and I was left alone. Alone, that is, except for the myriad demons in my head conspiring against me.

Quite suddenly and without judging the advisability of the notion, I determined to see if Norton was available for a reckless evening of distraction. I quickly scrawled a note implying the urgency of my demand and shouted for Hardcastle. He appeared as he had left and stood bemusedly staring at me. Perhaps he thought I'd finally gone mad and was about to kill him. I proffered the note towards him, and he recognized that his own life was probably not at risk.

"Would you be so kind as to deliver this note to Mr. Edward Norton?" I questioned.

He reached out at arms length and carefully took the
note from me.

"It will be my pleasure to do so. Mr. Norton is such a good companion, and I'm sure his company would revive your spirits considerably." Hardcastle had always liked Edward Norton and had obviously concluded that I wished to meet him in order to reduce my tendency towards lunacy. "Hardcastle, I can assure you that I am perfectly alright now, so there is no need to worry on my behalf." I pronounced the words with a sharply defined, cold voice, much the way perhaps that madmen do when protesting their sanity. Hardcastle seemed to accept my condition although, as always with Hardcastle, it was nigh on impossible to divine what he was really thinking.

I lay on the bed fully clothed in a fitful sleep until Hardcastle's closing of the front door signified his return. I sat bolt upright and immediately felt the surge of nausea which accompanies disorientation. Finally I grasped at reality and remembered the errand I'd sent him on.

He entered the room bearing the silver platter on which he always bore letters. I jumped up and snatched the reply from the tray.

"Dear Daniel,

I am alarmed by your condition but will seek to change it completely by the end of the evening. I will meet you at 8:30 in the drinking establishment you mentioned. Edward."
The said drinking establishment was a rather dark but wrongly maligned bar just off Covent Garden. It allowed for all sorts of bad behavior without the notoriety which gentlement usually find attendant at such places of dubious entertainment.

I continued to lie on the bed but put both arms behind my head and stared intently at the ceiling. Acton Lister was having a battle, and I was having one of a different, though connected, sort. I was determined that this evenings events would be sufficiently distracting to remove me a little way from Alicia and Lister. I realized it was not a solution but that had not been my intention. Time to think and reflect was what was needed, not a solution. I did not seek to avoid the conflict, simply to give myself more time to prepare for it. While I thought in this cryptic manner, I realized that not only would anybody I told be unable to understand, but that I myself didn't even understand what I was thinking.

Hardcastle entered the room and broke off my thoughts. He produced some victuals which I immediately realized were prepared for the express purpose of aiding the recovery of one who is sick. There was a small bowl of rather unappealing gruel and two pieces of buttered bread. For liquid nourishment, Hardcastle had provided a glass of tomato juice. The idea of Hardcastle treating me in
this way was somewhat amusing to me although I remained straight faced and thanked him for his concern. After he left the bedroom, I could not help but let out a barely audible laugh. Poor Hardcastle, he took everything so seriously.

I consumed the rather Spartan fare in its entirety, partly because I didn't wish to offend Hardcastle. It was now 6:30 p.m., and I had about one hour before I needed to depart for Covent Garden. I decided to dress without Hardcastle's assistance as inconspicuously as possible. I had often thought that there was little more ridiculous than seeing gentlemen in dinner suits cavorting around drinking dens in the middle of the night. With this in mind, I chose a brown woolen suit and an old Great Coat which if Hardcastle had his way would have been thrown out years ago.

I told Hardcastle not to wait up for me as I'd be almost certainly home late. As I departed the lodgings, he volunteered to straighten my cravat. I assured him it was unnecessary and that I intended it that way. The expression on his face was one which indicated that he'd concluded I was now insane.

* * *

The public houses and bars that occupied the narrow
street leading into Covent Garden were already filled with revellers. The welcoming lights and friendly sounds of conversation which emanated from each establishment I passed improved my spirits considerably, and by the time I reached the hostelry, I had arranged to meet Norton at, I was eager to enter and be purged by the warmth of humanity found therein.

Looking at my pocket watch, I realized that as usual my fear of being late had caused me to be early. Rather than find a table or alcove, I decided to sit at the bar until Norton arrived. From this position, I was able to survey the entire interior of the public house and observe its patrons in some detail. The place was not particularly full at this early hour. The type of clientele it attracted would be in the theater or opera or enduring dinner party engagements at the moment and would arrive here having finally managed to escape the demands of polite society. I always received a certain sort of thrill entering dens such as this. It was not thoroughly disreputable, but it gave one enough sense of daring to be worthwhile. I suppose that I was unduly influenced by these kind of things because I had not really had a wild and wayward youth. As a youth, I had never been one to refute law and order and had never really overcome the thrill which accompanies such activities. My childhood had been in many ways a
sterile, inactive experience and was partly to blame for my excessive zeal in searching out sin and entertainments of ill repute. I was susceptible to such things to a degree which was not common in one of my years. This is not to say I ever did anything wicked, indeed I was a victim of another personality defect: that of moderation. I had the spirit for such things but rarely the ability or inclination to go through with them.

Realizing that my mental meanderings had not included ordering a drink, I did so immediately. As I began to sip the gin and tonic, I'd ordered, I thought further of the subject of my own behavior.

I was undoubtably in a difficult position. I had a yearning to do at 24\(\frac{1}{2}\) what most had done at 19, and yet I was largely unable to go through with those desires because of my age and its attendant lassitude. I concluded that having the desires of a 19 year old did not match well with the realities of being a 24 year old.

Acton Lister was over 40, a very advanced number of years, and yet he, by most behavioral standards, acted like someone less than half his age. I suppose it was his behavior that encouraged my predilection for his company. I hoped that my education at his hands would somehow instill within me a similar pattern of behavior to that of his own.
Edward Norton entered the public house exactly on time. Even through the smoke-filled air, I recognized him the moment he entered. He, like me, had dressed in a great anonymous coat, but it did little to hide his erect form as he strode confidently towards me. As he approached, I ordered him a drink which the barman produced before Norton had barely sat on the adjacent stool.

"You remembered what I like to drink, Daniel. How brilliant you are." He rolled the brandy around the inside of the glass as he spoke.

"I arrived a little early so I had plenty of time to contemplate your drinking tastes. So how do you like it?" I asked, referring to the establishment.

He looked around at the interior of the place and smiled. "It is a good starting place for an evening of fun. And what of you, are your spirits improved?"

"Of course they are now you have arrived. How could it possibly be otherwise?"

We both remained silent for awhile as we concentrated on our drinks.

"My father has been more obnoxious than ever of recent days. He's demanding I be more serious about life. His idea of seriousness revolves around his business, and as far as I'm concerned that's no life at all. This evening is just what I need to compensate for all this talk of
seriousness. And you, Daniel, you seemed desperately in need yourself when you wrote that note. What has happened so suddenly to instill such a state upon you? When we met at the club, you seemed to be in fine spirits. What can have happened since?"

"It is a story which needs the telling, of that you can be sure."

Edward interrupted me. "Before you begin its telling, let me get us another drink."

This being done, I began to explain to Edward, as best as my own feeble understanding of it could allow for, the events of the meeting with Alicia LaFelice and Acton Lister.

"So you see, Edward, it's both a sorry state of mind to be in and yet one in which I feel compelled to take part."

"If I am not mistaken, Daniel, you are in the rare and unenviable position of being under two spells at once. Breaking from either, should you even wish to do so, will not be easy."

"Well, if you only saw Alicia for but a second, I'm sure you'd see the strength of the temptation. Indeed, you must see her so as to see the full extent of my position. But enough of this introspection. We are not here to discuss my problems but to forget them."
"Well said. Let's drink up and find an alcove to sit in before the place becomes too full."

Already the number of drinkers had nearly doubled since my arrival. We located a suitable, inconspicuous, dimly lit booth in the back of the place.

Edward Norton and I spent the next hour discussing, arguing and joking about almost every conceivable subject under the sun. By the end of that time, we decided to move on to another nearby watering hole of Edward's. He assured me of its bad reputation.

Upon leaving the public house and being confronted by the cold air, I realized that I was well under the influence of the demon drink. The task of walking the two hundred yards to our next port of call was more difficult than I imagined. The effort of walking in a straight line was barely within my powers of concentration. Edward was, though to a lesser extent, suffering from a similar difficulty. As we ambled along the narrow pavement, our situation reminded me of similar occurrences at Oxford.

As we trundled along the cobbles, we talked little as most of our efforts were spent in trying to circumnavigate the increasingly large number of pedestrians which were going in the opposite direction to ourselves. On one occasion which caused us both to giggle excessively, Edward was involved in the process of trying to pass a
particularly corpulent gentleman. They both moved one way to avoid each other then the other and finally back again. Edward burst into laughter and was unable, in the end, to do anything but laugh in the other fellow's face. He did not take the issue so light-heartedly. Being stone cold sober, he saw little amusement in being impeded by a couple of tipplers. Finally the crisis was resolved by my pushing Edward into the road. The other gentleman continued on his course, cursing as he went.

As we approached the rather more seedy end of Covent Garden, the path grew darker and the road more narrow. Already the street corners and shop doorways were beginning to be occupied by the occasional prostitute. Within fifteen yards of our destination, "The Cock Pit," I felt an arm slip through mine, and as I turned I was confronted with the inebriated form of a bedraggled street walker. I giggled foolishly as she attempted to convince me to partake of her womanly trade. In becoming tangled up with the girl, all three of us ended up in a knot blocking the pavement. I tried to convince the poor creature that while she was terribly charming, I had other business to attend to.

At this assertion, the previously pleasant but rough tongue of the creature turned most foul, and it was all I could do to extricate myself from her and head towards
the safety of "The Cock Pit." The result of this encounter was that Edward and I had to dash, most unbecomingly, in through the door of the said establishment. Unfortunately, the floor of "The Cock Pit" was about two feet below the street level. In our haste to escape the angry harlot, both Edward and myself failed to negotiate the unexpected steps on the other side of the inn door. The result of this mistake was that we both tumbled headlong into the bar. Had it not been for the number of patrons standing around the doorway, we would have undoubtedly rolled around the floor of the place. Instead, we proceeded to scatter the nearest drinkers in a most alarming fashion. Our unusual entrance was greeted with considerably less approbation than was good for us.

After a good deal of apology and payment for spilled drinks, we managed to turn the tide of disapproval. Both of us continued to laugh uncontrollably as we located seats and no doubt adequately and accurately portrayed our state of drunkenness to the other occupants of the place.

Having recovered somewhat from our entrance, I surveyed the scene. It was alot more earthy in here than our previous port of call. It was difficult to see the bar at all from where we sat. Palls of smoke drifted across ones vision from a large number of pipes, cigars and cigarettes.
The collection of humanity found herein ranged from pimps to fellows who Edward assured me he knew. He knew them but did not want them to see him. I suggested to him that our entrance had probably attracted their attention and that it was a little pointless at this juncture to try and avoid recognition. He laughed heartily at the truth of my observation. With this done, he shouted in a voice out of keeping with anonymity for a waiter to bring drinks.

As we sat drinking and insulting everyone we could think of including my dead uncle, a thought leapt into my consciousness.

"Edward, I have just had the most marvelous idea! You are going to meet Alicia LaFelice. I know where she sings; we can take a cab and go there immediately."

The idea seemed a good one when I thought of it since I had long since lost any of my fear for Alicia.

"Are you sure it's a good idea, Daniel? It wouldn't depress you, would it?"

"Depress me? How can a goddess be depressing?"

"In that case, let's go forthwith. I am eager to meet your princess, Daniel."

We stumbled back up to the street and were relieved to see that the 'lady' who'd arrested our progress earlier had gone. After a good deal of falling around the pavement and occasionally rolling around the gutter, we finally
secured a cab and set off for the Tottenham Court road.

In my excited state, it seemed hours before the short journey ended in our arrival at the restaurant Acton Lister had taken me to earlier. I led the way into the restaurant with Edward striving to keep up. We were, as when I came before, confronted by the Greek. He obviously remembered me but was unable to place a name on my being. Failing a name, he addressed me as "Mr. Lister's friend." I asked if we might have a table near the stage. He agreed to see what he could do. Awhile later, he returned and asked us to follow him. We did so and began to imitate his waddling strides. Edward began to laugh, and I attempted to hold back the imminent eruption which was rising inside me. In my condition, I was unable to tell if the Greek had noted our behavior. No doubt he had.

The restaurant was, as on my previous visit, filled with an absurd menagerie-like collection of individuals. In our present state, we were more at home here than when I had visited before.

The Greek assured me Alicia would be singing soon, and so we ordered drinks and waited expectantly. Using the time of our waiting profitably, I again related everything I knew of Alicia to Edward. He seemed eager to hear the story, so I repeated many of the details I'd told him earlier. Neither of us noticed nor cared. Before I could
finish my rendering of the events, the stage lights dimmed and Alicia swept onto the stage.

By the look on Edward's face, I could see he was suitably impressed. Seeing Alicia in this state of intoxication was like seeing Alicia for the first time; I was paralyzed with excitement. As she began singing, she looked confidently around at her admirers. As she looked in our direction, her eyes widened and I knew she'd recognized me. The second she stared into my eyes, the effect of the alcohol diminished considerably and I was left feeling the full effect of Alicia's power over me.

For the rest of her songs, I remained mesmerized by her, drawn to her by something which was neither pleasure nor pain. All my earlier anguish rushed headlong across my consciousness and very soon I began to wish she wouldn't look at me. My emotions were saved from total destruction by the conclusion of her act. As she moved back into invisibility, I was almost glad. Edward eagerly gave me his opinion of her, and we discussed her until we were interrupted by the appearance of Alicia at our table.

She sat down opposite us at the small table, and I lamely introduced my friend Edward.

"Why, Daniel, what a delightful friend you have." She eyed him casually and returned to her words. "I'm so surprised you're here. I would not have thought this to
be your kind of place."

"I hope you're not angry with me, Alicia."

"No, darling boy, not angry, overjoyed."

The effect of the alcohol was such that while I felt considerably more sober than earlier, I grew bold and unafraid of the consequences.

"Alicia, you are more beautiful than ever. All the world must be in love with you."

"Does the whole world include you, Daniel?"

"Of course, I'm the most potent of your admirers."

She had noted my state of intoxication and used it for what ends I did not know.

"Then if it is true, I must give you some hope of your efforts being rewarded. Do you think you love me more than Acton does?"

I sensed no trap. "Of course I do. He only loves you because of his obsession. I love you simply because I can do no other."

"You are too kind hearted, Daniel, and I could never deserve your love. I am sure no good will come of your loving me. I fear that I cannot be what you imagine I am."

"All I imagine that you are is wonderful. I know nothing of being successful or unsuccessful, only that you are perfect."
Even through my alcohol-drenched senses, I recognized that I was overstepping the bounds of common decency, so I decided to cease my rantings. I apologized to Edward for my foolishness and to Alicia for my drunkenness.

"Daniel, I quite like you like this; it makes you bold and fearsome. I think you should become like it more often. It brings out a side of you I had not recognized in Acton's studio."

"I am never so bold when with Lister. I'm afraid. It is difficult when one feels so overwhelmed by his presence."

"Yes, I know what you mean; I often feel the same."

My powers of concentration and my increasingly slurred speech meant that I was unable to continue in this vein of conversation. Instead I returned to praising the beauty and wonder that I beheld in the figure of Alicia. Edward began to laugh at my prosaic ramblings which only encouraged me further. In the end, Alicia said she had to go as she was excessively tired. I was unable to tell if she was embarrassed by my behavior and didn't like me at all or whether she did have regard for me but thought I should be stopped from saying anything further which I'd regret later. As Edward and I joked and conversed on whatever subjects came into our heads, I noted when I looked at her that she was staring at me intently and that her eyes
glistened with moisture. I smiled at her and in return she hinted at a smile. Every second was adding to the love I felt for her.

At last she determined to go and we decided to do likewise, accompanying her from the restaurant. I begged that I be allowed to escort her home in the cab she had called, but she would hear none of it.

"Daniel, it is not good that you should know everything about me. It might make you dislike me."

"Nonsense, I will never hate you. However, if you wish to go home alone, then I will not stop you."

I pouted the words angrily, hoping that she'd placate me. She did. As Alicia departed, she shook Edward's hand and wished him well. As she approached me, she held out both of her hands for me to clasp. I took them eagerly in mine and felt the chill of the night in her flesh. Instead of letting go of my hands, Alicia drew near to me and kissed me gently on the cheek. Her kiss was so delicate that it felt lighter than the air itself. Its effect on me was total, and I could only think of the name Alicia.

As we pulled away from each other, she spoke in a half whisper.

"Daniel, I too feel like you, but there is much danger, and I fear no good can come of you caring for me. The direction of love is not something we can control nor
The thought of Alicia actually liking me blocked out all of her other words, and I rested in the pleasure of the notion that she was fond of me. Her cab arrived, and she departed without further word.

"Edward, I am the happiest man in the world. It's not possible, but I believe she feels something for me."

"You may be right there, Daniel." Edward spoke reflectively and his tone was thoughtful.

"Come, let's catch a cab and return to my lodgings for a nightcap."

"I would love to, Daniel, but I have to be up early in the morning, and I already feel the discomfort of over-indulgence creeping upon me."

I did not push the issue further as I was absorbed in my own world and the loss of Edward was something that I couldn't really appreciate at that moment. We decided to get separate cabs, and accordingly we stumbled into our respective conveyances and rode away in opposite directions.

Like my other meetings with Alicia, this one had proved to be provoking. This time, however, I was happy thinking about Alicia and what had transpired that evening. I did not suffer from the confusion of our afternoon meeting but instead enjoyed the inexplicable nature of what had happened. I understood it no more, but it held little
of the madness that the earlier meeting had created.

When I reached home, it was gone one o'clock and I lurched rather noisily up to the front door. Eventually, I located my key and managed to enter. By now the heavier effects of the evening's drinking were beginning to settle on me, and it was all I could do to stumble into my bedroom and undress. I climbed into bed and lay between the cold sheets, waiting for my body heat to warm them up. I tried to think of Alicia, I was frightened of losing her image, but very soon it was a task that was too great for my powers of concentration.

As I lay on the verge of sleep, all around was silent. All London was asleep. It felt like I was in a giant graveyard and everyone else was dead. Before I could contemplate this theory any longer, I slipped with unintended ease into a deep sleep.
CHAPTER SEVEN

When I awoke the morning after my evening with Edward Norton, I felt as all such excessive revelling causes one to feel. My head felt as though it were on the verge of exploding. Even Hardcastle's careful steps thundered across the inside of my brain. I never did recover during the entire length of the day. By evening time, I felt well enough to read the paper for awhile and write some letters.

I was sustained through the day by a special brew of herb tea which Hardcastle had invented. He tiptoed into the study at regular intervals and produced the surprisingly palatable beverage. I did, however, feel by the end of the day as though I were awash with the stuff.

I spent the next couple of days as quietly as possible. I rarely went out and received no visitors. I occupied myself with the task of going through documents belonging to my uncle and writing to Jamieson and Cartwright informing them of my findings in Lancashire.
It was on the third day after the drinking episode that I received a caller. I was sitting at my bureau laboring over some old documents of my uncle's when Hardcastle came in to inform me I had a visitor. It was barely 11:00 a.m., and I couldn't imagine who'd be calling at such an uncivilized hour. Hardcastle informed me it was a lady and that she would not leave a name. I slipped my jacket on and followed him to the entrance hall. There I found the mysterious female; it was Alicia LaFelice. She appeared flushed and in a state of some agitation.

"Alicia, what on earth is the matter? You look terribly upset." As I spoke, Hardcastle disappeared and we were left standing alone together.

"Good morning, Daniel. I hope I didn't do wrong by coming here?"

"No, of course not. Come, let's go to the study. It's warmer and more comfortable there."

I took Alicia's coat, and she sat down on the chaise longue. She sat upright, not leaning on its back, and I sensed that our meeting would be more serious than the previous one. I looked into Alicia's face. Even in this somber attitude, it was perfect. For the first time I could remember, Alicia did not look directly at me. Her eyes skirted the edges of my face, looking behind me and on either side but never directly at me.
"What is it, Alicia? What has made you so agitated? I could not have believed I would ever see you like this had I not witnessed it with my own eyes."

"There are a number of things you would not believe about me, Daniel. You are very innocent."

"I may be innocent, Alicia, but I only need to be told what's happening, and I'll catch on quickly enough. I know it's got something to do with Acton Lister. You're in love with him, aren't you?"

"Ah, Daniel, you do indeed have a child's view of life. The world comprises of more difficulties than being in love or not being in love. My relationship with Acton is not as you imagine. He is not in love with me, and I'm not in love with him. We are attracted to each other, it is true. He is ensnared by the madness of his fantasies. Acton is an obsessive man; he is obsessed with you as he is obsessed with me. He does not act according to the whims of his wants as he would have you believe. He is driven to what he does by deep, uncontrollable passions. He is obsessed with me because he has created his own fantasy and spun it around me. For him, his passions are a struggle between life and death. Every ounce of his existence is spent in controlling me. Not physically or by demands but by trying to gain control of the essential spirit of my existence. His desire to paint me will, he believes,
bring him the happiness he seeks. Not the happiness of contentment but the happiness of power."

"But if that is so, Alicia, then why do you allow yourself to be drawn into such a struggle? Why do you return to his studio? You must refuse to see him again if either of you are to be happy."

"Good advice, Daniel, but would you take it if I gave it to you? If I told you to never meet with Acton or myself, would you agree? No, you would not. You are on the periphery of the battle, and yet you are powerless to escape. Imagine how much harder the jaws bite around me. I cannot let go, for I am already in the trap. It is ironic that we are all in each other's traps, none of us can escape. I am in Acton's, he in mine, you in his, he in yours, and, Daniel, I am in your trap. I feel an aching for you which I cannot escape. I feel bound by my passion for you, and I sense you feel the same for me. So, you see, Daniel, it is not a happy picture. Each one of us is eating away at the other. Each of us is like acid corroding everything we contact. I came this morning because I need you and yet I must not have you. It will kill us both."

As she spoke, hot tears slipped down the perfect slope of her cheek. I was moved by her almost beyond control. I wished I could hold her until we became as one.
"I don't know how to answer you, Alicia. It is all so complex, and indeed, the way you describe it is hideous. You must stop sitting for Lister's painting, otherwise you will be ruined. He will control you utterly, and you'll both be destroyed."

"I cannot stop going to his studio, Daniel, just as you cannot. Already we cling to the beast that will destroy us. There is also something else which will make you hate and despise me."

"No, Alicia, there is nothing which could ever make me despise you. Nothing you tell me will turn me against you."

"Daniel, my problems are not just the ones of the mind. The struggles I face with Acton and yourself are not my only ones. I am a morphine addict."

The words hit me with the power of a hammer. I sat absorbing the revelation, fitting the details of Alicia's life into their new framework.

"Alicia, I'm so sorry. How could I ever know?"

"Daniel, don't insult me by going on to describe your pity for me. Pity will not help, nothing will help. I only tell you that you might see why I will never have the strength to escape. You are not so unfortunate, your life has hope. Don't ruin it on me. I do care for you, Daniel, but it is the contents of an empty, dried husk. You see
beauty on the outside, but the inside is rotten and soaked in the substance which is my only salvation. I may love you today, but tomorrow I will sit at the feet of Acton. I will not recognize pain but lie back and wallow in the warmth inside me. It is not a life I can involve you in. You are too pure, too beautiful to be ruined by being ensnared in my wretched life. If you do love me, Daniel, then you must leave me. We can have no life together."

"Alicia, I cannot have a life without you. I don't care what happens or how you treat me, I will love only you. Come let us be married. I will inherit my fortune soon and you will be able to have anything you wish. I can take you from this misery. Please let me, I beg you!"

Alicia's face showed she was fighting a battle right now. "Daniel, poor Daniel, can't you see marriage would not solve anything? I am driven like an animal; I do not control my passions, they control me. You cannot stop me being what I am even though you love me so much. I have no strength; my energies are already expended. It is too late for me, Daniel. If I loved you less, perhaps I would agree to your demands, but I cannot. It would end in the destruction of us both. You must leave me to my fate. If you try to influence it, you will be destroyed."

"What you have told me will not diminish my resolve, it will strengthen it. I will never leave you now I know
that you love me. Had I not known you felt as you do, I would have foregone my own love, but now I know otherwise I will not give up."

At the conclusion of my words, Alicia jumped up from her chair and stamped around the room, wringing her hands. My answer had obviously increased her agitation. I walked over to her and took her by the arm, hoping to calm her. She pulled her arm from mine violently and took a few steps away from me.

"Daniel, if you won't see sense, then I shall have to make you. I will not allow you to ruin your life no matter how hard you try." She spoke in a cold, calculating voice, but its thin veneer could not entirely cover her emotion.

"We'll see about that. Neither of us will be able to remain apart for long, you'll see."

I spoke in a threatening voice which was not entirely what I'd anticipated. I counteracted this unintended harshness by drawing close to Alicia and embracing her tightly. At first she did not yield to my intentions but held herself stiffly apart, refusing to submit to what we both wanted. I did not give up my grip on her. I could not for I was driven to it compulsively.

"please, Alicia, you cannot do this. You know you need me; we need each other, there's no escaping that."
As I spoke, I felt her relax slowly in my arms and felt at once that I was dissolving into her being. As she slipped her slender, bare arms around me, I realized I no longer existed independently of Alicia. I felt us melting together until neither of us was clearly visible.

"Oh, Daniel, we should not be doing this. No good can come of it. Please don't let me love you."

I silenced her protests by kissing her upturned face. She responded eagerly and then I knew I could never leave her. As if she also sensed my conclusion, she spoke.

"Daniel, my resolve is weakest now I'm with you, but do not comfort yourself with imagining that I'm always this weak. When I leave, I will build up my resistance and you will not find me so easily convinced as now."

She spoke as though she were trying to convince herself as well as me. I felt her body pull away from mine a fraction and acquiesced by releasing her. She straightened her hat and looked in the mirror above the fire.

"I must be going, Daniel. I have things to attend to."

"What things, Alicia?"

"Things which are not your business and which you would not approve of. I am not only ruled by my love for you. Remember all I have told you, for it is all true. My love for you in no way lessens the power of my other obsessions."
I remembered what she'd said of Lister and the morphine. I was instantly jealous of the one and hateful of the other. As I spoke, Alicia moved towards the door. The pain of realizing that she was leaving tore at my heart, but I let her go. She needed time to think on what she felt for me, and I needed time, perhaps forever, to understand my desire for her. When I thought of her, my mind was unable to see any other reality. She was the only creature that existed. She began to exist even more than myself.

I followed Alicia out of the room as if I were being hypnotized by her retreating form. I was thankful Hardesty was out or had the good sense not to appear. In the shadowy passage of the entrance hall, I could almost feel Alicia's presence in the air. The cool air became heavy and clung like moss to rocks. Alicia turned towards me as she reached the front door. Her dark eyes flared, being unable to hide the intense feeling she hid behind them. Her eyes alone were enough to destroy every resolve I could ever have. Her power ripped around the hall, ploughing into my soul every time it hit. She had an unimagineable force which no one, not even she, could control. At last, she temporarily reigned in its force and was left with a face of purest beauty and guileless features. In a split second I had seen the two poles of her being at
war with each other. She sensed that I understood what had happened and spoke in a quiet voice which echoed around the hollow entrance hall.

"You see, Daniel, there is something evil in me that I cannot control. It is a power beyond consent. I cannot use it, it uses me."

With these words, she opened the door and left my lodgings. I was about to ask her to wait while I called a cab. As I looked after her form, I saw she had a carriage waiting. I recognized the carriage; it was Acton Lister's. As Alicia climbed into his carriage, she paused as if she might turn and say something. She did not turn around but proceeded to enter the carriage and become lost in its dark interior.

I watched the carriage until it disappeared from view. I turned woodenly and stumbled back into the house. Suddenly I lost all my life's force. I was hardly able to even walk. The effort of meeting Alicia had obviously drawn on my body's reserves. Now I was left feeling empty of everything. I wandered in a daze back to the study. As I entered, I caught the slightest hint of her being, perhaps it was her perfume but it smelt as if it were more essential, as if it were her breath.

I could do nothing all day but sit in a morbid remembrance of what had happened. Hardcastle came in later and
enquired if I'd be eating out or at home. I informed him absently that I'd be doing neither. He left me, and I sat in the encroaching gloom of early evening. Even the fire seemed to reverence the misery of my situation. Its flames ceased flickering and simply ebbed and flowed and finally died down to a glow as the embers fought to give a last flare of light before they finally expired.

As the light from the fire diminished, so my spirits declined. They slipped into a depth of anguish which was such that I grew calm and quiet in my mind. A sense of resignation passed into me. I lay back in the arms of my own tragedy and calmly allowed it to flow over me.

I had a dinner party engagement that evening, but I knew I'd never go. Nothing mattered except the journey I was descending on. It took me further down until the light finally disappeared, and I no longer recognized who I was and what was happening to me.

During the evening of that same day, I rallied somewhat and managed to write a note to Major Braithwaite and his wife asking that they might forgive me for not attending their dinner party. After I had dispatched the note with Hardcastle, I decided to drink the tea which Hardcastle had produced prior to his leaving. I needed reviving but I had little confidence in the beverage's ability to restore me in any way at all. I needed to feel better
and yet I realized that I would not forget what was happening
to me by simply meeting with friends and going out drinking.
The problems I faced could not be resolved by a change of
circumstances. Indeed, I doubt whether they could be
changed at all. Already my recently acquired problems
sat upon me as if they were part of me. They were not
easily discernable as being something new; they were embedded
in my mind strongly enough to imply they'd been there
forever.

I had always believed that one's problems could only
be solved by oneself and that it was not possible to find
a personal solution in the life of someone else. That may
be true, but I no longer rested in the confidence that I
could solve my own problems. I was as powerless to even
understand them as my uncle had been in attempting to produce
an heir. The thought of my uncle reminded me that I was alone
in the world, that I had no family. As I sat in the lonely
isolation of the shadowy study, the enormity of my problem
struck me. It was as if I alone existed in the whole universe.
And yet that could not be true for my situation was not
entirely of my own doing. My chance meeting with Lister
and Alicia had precipitated this calamity. It was small
comfort to think that at least two other people existed.
They were equally, nay even more so, bound up in their own
living hells.
I grew weary with this attempted analysis of the predicament and decided to devote myself to the less difficult task of staring absent-mindedly around the room. To an outsider looking in the open curtains, it would have seemed as though I were in a trance. I remained in this condition until I was awakened with a start by the return of Hardcastle. He entered the study and switched on the light. I felt as miners must feel coming out of the pit after a ten hour shift in the darkness. Hardcastle had in his hands a small basket which, he informed me, contained a selection of nourishing comestibles for one who was in my condition. On receiving my note and its false portrayal of my health, Mrs. Braithwaite was moved to provide the basket and its contents as an aid to my soon recovery.

I felt a heel for blaming my absence on ill health and thus soliciting this symbol of Mrs. Braithwaite's sympathy. However, guilty as I felt, it was insignificant when compared to the misery I would have felt had I gone. The Braithwaites were an honorable couple but hardly interesting enough to spend dinner with. At a time like this there was just no possibility of me being able to stand the thought of meeting anyone, least of all the Braithwaites.

Hardcastle approached with the basket, and I took it from him, being vaguely curious of its contents. He left the room, and I was left alone with the basket. I lifted
the cover of the basket and peered inside. There I saw a jar of strawberry preserves, some dried fruit, a small cheese and some white wine. The basket seemed more suitable for a picnic than a sick person. I put the basket on the floor, having lost interest in it almost immediately, and looked around for something else to bestow my limited energy on. I began writing a letter to Alicia but got only to the third sentence before I tore it up. I would have begun again but I realized any letter I might write would end up the same way.

Eventually, I settled on the occupation of solitary card playing. It was an ideal distraction for one as disturbed as I was. It allowed for my nervous energy to be partially dissipated but was not sufficiently demanding to leave me entirely drained. I fiddled in this aimless manner until I considered it late enough to embark on what I was sure would be a sleepless night.

Indeed the night was restless. I lay waiting for the moment that occurs just before one loses consciousness. It never come. I lay looking up to the ceiling for hours, occasionally turning and attempting a new solution to the problem of insomnia. I was not kept awake thinking of Alicia, that I would not have minded, rather I was racked by a confusion of mind in which Alicia's image did not appear once. All the characters in my mind were dark shadows
wheeling around like crows over a dead animal. It seemed as though I were the prey and the nameless carrion circled around my head as they waited for me to give up the ghost. The night continued to pass in this timeless nightmare until finally the gray dawn crept into the bedroom.

I arose that morning having felt none of the benefits of sleep. I ached along the length of my body and began to feel as if I really was sick after all. On reflection, I decided that a physical sickness would be very appropriate and would parallel the sickness of the mind that I was feeling. I moved around the lodgings that morning as though there were little in life worth living for. Without Alicia, there would be no point in living. Surely it was better to live a short and dangerous life than a long and empty existence. If I'd had a family, perhaps they would comfort me. As it was, I was entirely alone. My youth had been free of the usual family religion, and in consequence I could gain little support from faith or belief.

I had often pondered the subject of God. I was not a religious man and rarely attended church, but this did not stop me from thinking about God. I wished now that I'd reached a positive conclusion about God's existence. If he did exist then, even if he didn't care for my existence, at least I could comfort myself with the knowledge that
there were at least two of us in the universe. Philosophical thought was not my strong point, and I feared my agnosticism was based on my inability to see issues clearly. Had I been a greater thinker, then perhaps I would not be in the situation I was in now. Whatever the case concerning God's existence, I wished he'd do something to alleviate the misery I was going through.

I walked over to the window and looked out across the street. A gardener was tidying up the garden of a house opposite in anticipation of spring. Everything seemed to be getting ready for spring, the weather, the flowers, the birds, the grass. I was the only one stuck firmly in the frozen mud of winter. This was supposed to be a time of new beginnings and renewal; instead I felt more like I was dying. It was now the beginning of March and in a few months I was to become rich. I should be happy and full of plans and ideas. Instead I was embroiled in a desperate love affair which was beginning to look increasingly doomed to failure. If there was any spring in me at all, then I could not let it fail. It must be successful. I could not let Alicia leave me; she had nowhere to go. I believe she needed me.

* * * *
I spent most of the next few days being torn between the need for action and the forced inaction caused by my listlessness. I occupied as many hours of the day as possible with the business of pointless tasks. I forced myself to conduct minor forays into the outside world. I did not do this because it made me happy but because it filled time and space and stopped the days becoming great yawning caverns of emptiness.

All the time I had in the back of my mind the realization that I would do something soon. It was as if I were biding my time until strong enough. I knew I would return to Lister's studio. I needed to see him and fit him into the puzzle for myself. I must see Alicia, but I was still unsure if I was able to stand meeting both together.

After another less than peaceful night passed, I decided I would visit Lister's house that very day. Once I'd settled on this resolve, I felt as though much of my misery had been dissipated. It was an unreasonable conclusion to reach, but I reached it all the same. I had no reason to feel better. After all, a meeting with Lister and Alicia would only continue the bitter struggle which was developing within all three of us. I comforted myself with the knowledge that because of Alicia's love for me, she'd be eager to see me again. This was not a well founded belief as Alicia was bound to act differently.
towards me in front of Lister. She would not open herself up as she had done just a few days earlier. Indeed the opposite would be true. I would seem like the odd one out; Alicia and Lister would be ranged against me. I would feel the blast of their attack. These arguments did not discourage my resolve but simply highlighted the danger I faced.

That morning I found it difficult to do anything but pace along the length of the study. All I could think of was a kind of mock production of my arrival and stay in Lister's studio. I conceived of every possible variant that might apply to my proposed meeting and acted out each one in my head. This procedure had the effect of exemplifying the reality of my predicament. It was, on a more positive note, an ideal way of helping me to prepare for every possible catastrophe that could happen. After some further thinking along this line, I realized that if I continued I could undoubtedly talk myself out of the forthcoming confrontation. It would probably be a good thing if my theorizing did preclude the actual meeting. It is often the case that the things we wish would not happen come upon us with unexpected rapidity. So it was with my intention to visit Lister that day.

Before I realized, it was early afternoon. The approaching hour of reckoning stole up to me and caught me by surprise. My earlier attempts to condition myself
to whatever happened this afternoon seemed of little help to me now. The sudden reality of my predicament left no room for any response but a kind of fear which bordered on panic. I began to ready myself for departure. I called Hardcastle and asked him to secure a cab for me. I waited alone in the house until he returned. I was half hoping Hardcastle would be unable to locate a cab and I'd be forced to stay at home.

The cab was procured, and I did depart as I had planned to Lister's house. My excitement during the journey made it hard for me to know whether the journey went too quickly or lasted too long. As the cab approached the tree-lined avenue on which Lister's house was to be found, I asked the driver to stop. I determined to walk the last few yards and in the process try and pull myself together.

As I walked towards the big white house I felt like those who climb the gallows must feel. It was as though I were reaching my final destination, a place where I could go no further. As I grew nearer, the house began to block out all else. Its whiteness loomed like some organism brought into focus under the microscope. I approached the great oak door and rang the bell. A servant I had not seen before answered it. I stated my business and waited to be admitted.
"Do you have an appointment with Mr. Lister, sir?"

"No, I don't, but if you inform him of my arrival I'm sure he will see me."

"I'm afraid Mr. Lister asked not to be disturbed. He is occupied."

I had no doubt he was, and I could easily imagine with whom.

"Look, my good man, I don't give a damn what he told you, just go and tell him I'm here." I spoke in a forceful, not entirely controlled tone, and the butler shrank visibly under my onslaught.

"I will see what I can do if you will wait here for a moment, sir."

The servant, while younger than the usual one, was not capable of making much speed up the long stairway. I grew impatient and began to pace up and down the length of the hallway. During my marchings, at a point where I was nearest the stairs, I saw the servant hobbling along the balcony towards the top of the stairs. Before he could speak a word, I began to climb the stairs. As I did so, the confused fellow began to speak.

"The master wishes you to join him if you'd be so kind."

I thanked the fellow and approached the study. I had lost all my nervousness and had forgotten everything
that I'd contemplated earlier. The gravity of the approaching situation eluded me for the moment, and I knocked on the door loudly.

"Daniel, is that you? Come in, don't stand there knocking the door down."

I listened to Lister's voice then opened the door and entered. The room was filled with the sweet odor of the cigarettes that Lister smoked in the privacy of his studio.

"What a surprise this is, Daniel. You are becoming delightfully unpredictable. It is always nice when loved ones visit without warning. It makes one's heart thrill. So, tell me, how have you been? Alicia tells me she visited you a few days ago. How charming of her."

So Lister knew all that was happening. I looked around the room expecting to see Alicia concealed in some dark corner. Lister guessed the reason for my visual investigation of the studio.

"I'm afraid, Daniel, that Alicia is not here yet. I'm expecting her here any minute, so we don't have long to wait until we are complete. In the meantime, let me show you the next best thing, the painting of Alicia."

I silently followed Lister to the canvas. It was still unfinished, but it had developed considerably beyond when I saw it last. The sublime figure and perfect face
were easily discernable as being Alicia's. I hated the idea of Lister seeing Alicia naked day after day. While she lay uncovered at his mercy, he painted away, gaining strength with every brush stroke.

"Acton, you are certainly working hard on this painting. When will it be finished?"

I hoped that upon its conclusion I would be able to take Alicia away for good.

"I fear it will never be finished. There is too much in Alicia to put on canvass. Anytime I would think it was finished, I'm sure I would suddenly find some new aspect of her brilliance which needed portraying."

"But surely you will have to finish it. You won't be able to keep on adding to it indefinately."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. The strain of such a never ending ordeal would undoubtably kill Alicia or myself or perhaps even both of us. Anyway, let's sit and talk before Alicia arrives. I fear that once she is here there will be no time for men's talk."

We went over to the chaise longue and seated ourselves. Lister offered me a cigarette; I took it, thinking that perhaps it would relax me somewhat. At first, as was Lister's normal strategy, we talked of everyday things. He informed me of all that had transpired at the various social functions which I had missed during the last few days.
Lister labored with his explanations, and it was obviously a reflection of the misery these affairs had been for him. By the time he had completed his colorful descriptions of the distinctly colorless functions, I was quite glad I hadn't attended any of them.

It was about this time that Lister began to steer toward another subject.

"Daniel, I fear that you have quite forgotten the reason for your visiting my studio."

"Why Acton, I thought I came here in order to sit at the feet of the master. Besides, I thought you enjoyed my visits."

"Of course I do. They are the dearest thing in the whole world to me. However, that, as you know, does not detract from the darker purpose of our meeting. Your portrait, I must paint your portrait. You have escaped my nagging of recent times, but now my resolution is re-established, and I must insist that we begin soon."

I sensed the need he had to paint and thought how I would become should he succeed in his demands.

"Surely you could not paint two canvasses at the same time. It would dilute your passion for the one already in hand."

He viewed me with suspicion and obviously did not believe this was my entire reasoning.
"Daniel, why is it that you are reticent to be painted?"
His words bore deeply into me, and I was unsure, until
I actually spoke, whether I would tell him or not. As it
happened, without premeditation, I began to explain.

"Acton, as I have become better acquainted with you,
I think, even in my ignorance, that I have learned some­
thing of your mind and how it works. I do not wish to seem
arrogant, but I believe I have seen you in a new light.
I honestly think it would be better for both of us and
our relationship if you did not paint me."

He stared at me as I spoke as if some unseen thing
was rising up inside him. When it reached his eyes,
it began to boil until his eyes glowed with heat.

"What on-earth are you saying it won't be good for
either of us. Are you mad? How could you possibly know
what would be good for either you or me. You are totally
ignorant. You have no experience of anything and suddenly
you start telling me what is or is not good for us."

As he spoke, his anger and frustration grew hotter
and hotter until he finally stopped himself just as he
was about to explode.

"Acton, I don't wish to contradict you, and I realize
that compared to you I know nothing, but all the same you
cannot blame me for my opinion of the matter. You would
be the first to applaud independance of mind."
"Yes, yes, you are right, Daniel. Forgive me, I did not mean to react as I just did. We must discuss this calmly and in a way befitting the friendship I know we have." He recovered from the eruption of a few seconds before and now he was again in control.

"Well, Acton, I have observed both you and Alicia since you began painting her. What I have seen has not encouraged me to partake in a similar affair. You two appear to be in a struggle which I can only surmise is strongly related to you painting her. It has brought deep, uncontrollable passions out in both of you."

"How absurd of you to imagine that the same thing would happen between us were I to paint you. We do not clash as I occasionally do with Alicia. We are of like minds, we see eye to eye and need not struggle as you suppose I do with Alicia."

"I believe you mean that, Acton, but I have seen from your own behavior and Alicia's words that things are not so occasional as you would have me believe."

Acton Lister's face grew hard and he spoke.

"I trust you are not calling me a liar, young man."

"No, no, of course not. I mean no insult at all. It is simply that I fear for our relationship and perhaps also for my own soul."

"You should not fear for your soul, Daniel. We are
as you might remember, trying to lose it. The purpose of your education is to suit you for a life of ease and delinquent pleasure. This, as you imply, will be an ideal way for you to lose your soul. It is a goal in itself."

"I'm afraid I hadn't thought this would be the way we would go about it. I imagined that it would be entirely painless."

"Nothing is entirely painless, Daniel, but this will be considerably less painful than you seem to imagine. You cannot compare yourself to Alicia. I'm sure she has told you something of herself; she is hardly the same as you. Her life is already nearly over, that is why I must capture her now. The conflict you see between us is there because the time is short. It is this which causes us both the pain you have witnessed."

Lister's words began, as always, to eat away at my own belief on the subject. I knew I was right and there was more to this than he admitted. Unfortunately, his words had a pervasive quality about them which undermined what I thought was right. Before I could summon my thoughts to counterattack Lister's arguments, the studio door opened and Alicia LaFelice entered.

The atmosphere changed the second she appeared. No longer were Lister and I dueling over the matter. I glanced
at Lister and noted that his expression had changed. He was no longer concerned with me, I was his prey no more. Instead, he drew together all his energies to engage Alicia.

Alicia looked pale and worn, but she fought her state of exhaustion and managed to convey power and control. She was using every last fiber of her being to defend her weak spot from Lister. As she moved towards us, she held out her hand for me to kiss. As it drew near, I caught the scent of her body. It was just as it was when I smelt it in the hallway of my lodgings. Its presence reinforced my belief that nothing had changed and that things were as desperate as I'd imagined before Lister tried to convince me otherwise.

"Ah, Alicia, we have been waiting with immeasurable expectancy for your arrival. Indeed, we were just talking about you and the painting."

She turned her head toward the canvas with an air of resignation. She then turned and looked at me and for a second I caught a glimpse of her inner helplessness. Soon it was covered by her mask.

"Acton, I don't imagine Daniel has the same inclination to be talking about either the painting or its subject as you do. I hope you haven't been boring him with your praises of my remarkable beauty." She spoke the words in obvious cynical imitation of his habit of praising her
beauty to a third party while she was present.

"As you know, Alicia, I am your most ardent admirer. I could never hear enough of your praises."

She eyed me and looked annoyed. She obviously didn't want me to play her and Lister's game.

"Please, gentlemen, let's not discuss me any further."

She looked as though the strain of acting as if nothing was wrong was too much for her.

Alicia sat down and looked down at her clasped hands. All three of us sat in silence; it was both embarrassing and tense. The silence was finally broken by Acton Lister's voice.

"Alicia, Daniel has doubts about me painting him. What's your opinion on the matter?"

"I think Daniel should do whatever he thinks is best for himself. If he wants to be painted, then fine, but if, as I suspect, he senses an unwanted danger in the activity, then he shouldn't. Daniel, you would be wise to listen to no one but yourself on this matter."

"Alicia, I would have thought that you would have sided with me. After all, you know how much I want to paint him. Besides, it will give you a chance to spend time together. I know you two lovebirds would enjoy nothing more."

By the end of his last sentence, Lister's voice had developed a sneering tone. I was about to give him
a piece of my mind when Alicia broke in.

"Acton, your petty-minded behavior is unbecoming. I had not expected such silliness from you; perhaps the strain of the painting is too much for you. If you like, we can stop it right here before it overcomes you." She spoke self-assuredly and calmly. She contrasted sharply with Lister's outburst, and it was Alicia who was on top, not Lister.

"Of course you're right, Alicia. I am being foolish, please forgive me, both of you. We must complete the painting, so I will behave."

She moved over to Lister and stood behind where he sat. She began to massage his shoulders as if she were soothing his passion. All the time she did this, she looked straight into my eyes. At first, I was jealous of her treatment of Lister, but soon I was captive to her eyes and unable to be anything except what she ordered me to be.

After awhile Lister spoke. "Daniel, you must not see me as a threat as far as dear Alicia is concerned. There is certainly enough within her for both of us. Besides, I think that we both need her for different purposes, so there is no need for conflict at all. Alicia, as you can see, is capable of being whatever your heart desires. She can be warm, passionate and yielding
for one and for another she can be violent, hard, and resolute. So you see, dear boy, we must find in her what we need most."

Alicia continued to rub Lister's shoulders and appeared to pay little attention to his words. I, on the other hand, was rapidly becoming incensed. How dare he treat Alicia like this. She was not a piece of property, she was a person, not an object to use as he willed.

"Lister, I feel that you and I have very little in common on the subject of Alicia. I do not use her as you obviously do. I don't wish her to be an amusement or plaything. I am in love with her."

"Well done, Daniel, I'm glad to see you get your feelings into the open. But I must argue with you on the subject. You are using Alicia just as much as I am. The only difference is that you claim your love makes everything alright. In fact, the only difference between us is that you are a hypocrite. I am willing to admit my claim on Alicia, but you deceitfully hide yours behind your so-called love. I suppose you are going to tell me that you don't require anything from Alicia at all."

"That is exactly right, Acton, I don't need to paint her to gain some sort of satisfaction. I don't need to imprison her like you do. I simply love her and that's all there is to it."
"Very laudable, but I fear you are either deluding yourself or trying to delude us. You say that you require nothing of our beautiful Alicia and that you love her with all your heart. In that case, why do you demand to see her when she has told you she doesn't want to see you again? Why don't you leave her alone and be content to love her? Oh no, you couldn't do that, could you? Because your honest, sincere love needs to feed on her. It cannot exist without her, you need to use her, otherwise what would you be..."

Suddenly, without warning, Alicia interrupted our argument about her.

"Stop it, both of you! I will not listen to anymore of your arguing. How can you two sit there arguing about me as if I were not even here? I am here, and I have feelings. I am sick and tired of both of you. Just leave me alone and stop trying to tell each other what I will or will not like. Neither of you could possibly know anything of what I am or what I feel. You're both far too concerned with your own lives to have any interest in me except as to how you can use me. I won't stand for it any longer; it is finished. Acton, I will not sit for you a minute longer. You can finish your painting by memory for all I care. The whole thing disgusts me."

He tried to interrupt her.
"Do not interrupt me! I have not finished. I am sick and tired of playing your idiotic games and I will do it no more."

She paced up and down the room, her cheeks flaming with the heat of her passion. I stood and approached her, hoping I might calm her.

"Do not touch me, Daniel. Leave me alone." Tears began to roll down her burning cheeks. "Please, Daniel, can't you see nothing can come of this? I cannot be what you imagine I am. You must let me go. You and Acton are different, I will admit that, but you both are trying to hold me and neither of you realize the damage you do to all of us. Please don't argue with me. Just allow me to be alone. I do love you, Daniel, and Acton knows I don't love him, but that is no advantage to either of us. Neither Acton nor you, Daniel, can have me in the way you wish."

Ever since Alicia said she would no longer sit for the portrait, Lister's visage had changed. He sat staring emptily into space. His eyes looked lifeless as if he'd seen a vision of his own death.

It was his face and its obvious acknowledgment of Alicia's resolution which began to weigh on my soul. If Acton was unable to persuade Alicia and had accepted his failure, how would I ever make her change? It would be nigh on impossible. I decided that Acton Lister's presence was
conducive to my attempts to persuade Alicia. I returned to my seat and sat in glum silence.

"Daniel, take one of these cigarettes. I fear both of us are in danger of losing that which we need most," Acton said.

I took the cigarette and began to smoke. Lister was right, it was the same for both of us. He would never finish the painting of Alicia and I would never have her in my life. For some reason, I began to try and decide which of us had most to lose. At first I was sure I did, but the intensity of Lister's needs was terrifyingly powerful. I mulled over Alicia's words, trying to fit them together in a way which changed her intentions; it was not possible. No one could misunderstand what she had said. I began to see that what she had said was true. Lister and I were the same; we both saw Alicia in terms of what we wanted. I saw her in terms of how I loved Her. I judged her according to whether Lister or myself needed her most. All the time it was what we needed. We never thought of her. I suppose that was partly due to the fact that she was so perfect. We had both, in our own ways, set her up as an idol and were intent on getting as much as was possible from our idol.

The room was growing darker by the minute. During the argument we'd had, I had not noticed how the time had
passed. Alicia stood a distance from Lister and I as we sat on our separate chairs. Each of us was growing dimmer in the perception of the others as the evening began. Soon we were like three dark islands in a black sea. This phenomenon had the effect of exacerbating the feeling of isolation that each one of us was undoubtably undergoing. It was ironic that all of the problems each of us was causing for the others could not be resolved by discussion. None of us saw any solution except our own.

The darkness continued to envelope us until Lister stood up and lit one of the lamps. The result was that I felt like I'd been suddenly placed in a room with two people I'd never met before. I became flustered and my nervousness began to speak.

"What are we to do? Is there any solution?"

They both looked at me, not being sure as to whom I was addressing my query.

"Alicia, I realize now that you are right. I have excluded your needs and wants from my mind. It is therefore up to you to judge the situation. It is you we are sinning against."

"That is not entirely true, Daniel, for I know you don't act like this all the time. I feel it is my fault that I have influenced you so drastically. I have seen that you are normally well-balanced and not prone to this
kind of behavior. Therefore, I can only assume that it is my fault that you have become entangled in this mad affair."

"Please, Alicia, do not blame yourself. How were you to know that I would become so enamored with you. You did not seek me out, I found you and fell in love without your trying to make me."

"Please, please, dear children, enough of this confessing. It will do none of us any good. If the solution were as simple as you make out, no doubt we would undergo whatever it demanded. However, I'm afraid it is not. All of us are driven by a force, perhaps by different forces, but we cannot fully control these forces. Alicia, you are just as powerless to stop coming here to my studio as Daniel, poor fellow, is incapable of seeing you for the last time. By the same token, I cannot live unless I complete the painting. It will be my destruction if I do not complete it. Just the same as Daniel's destruction will be imminent if he cannot be allowed to love you. So you see, Alicia, you simplify the issue to such an extent that it changes completely. You yourself would do well not to underestimate your own passions. Remember that it was only a short while ago that you welcomed the challenge of the painting. Also, you must have originally been very pleased with yourself having captured the heart
of such a delightful young man."

Alicia's face grew harder, and I detected some new force building within her being. I felt as though she were fighting with some new idea which was growing with such speed that I judged she spoke sooner than she had really wished to.

"Very well, Acton, we shall go ahead with the painting. You will see for yourself that your obsessions will end in misery. There will be no victory for either of us. However, I have no particular love for life, so I will meet you and play the game. Do not imagine it will be pleasant. Any victory you may sense will eat away at you until it consumes you. You say you have already lost your soul, but you will soon feel the pain of the soul in its death throes. You pride yourself on your ability to be amoral and act without restraint or responsibility; soon you will feel such anxiety and suffering that your soul will ache for release."

Alicia's words seemed to come from all parts of the room. The strength of her conviction was too great to emanate from one place. Her being filled me with a mixture of fear and wonderment. I had once considered Lister's studio a place of fascinating distraction, but now it faded into insignificance next to the creature which held us all in her grip. Both Lister and I were attracted
to her like insects on a spiders web. It had appeared all along that we were using Alicia for our own purposes, but now I was beginning to realize it was all a little deeper than that. Alicia was not quite the helpless victim of our machinations that I had first imagined. She showed attributes which were not synonymous with a victim's character. Lister, in his hard analysis, had probably been right in observing the situation as he had. Our needs were drawing us into Alicia's clutches in exactly the same way as Lister had drawn me to his great white house that rainy afternoon a month ago. I wondered how I would have felt then if I'd had any idea of what was about to begin. It is certainly propitious of the creator of man to refuse him the power of divining the future. To see the future would be to commit oneself to the misery of a tragedy before it even happened.

Lister had promised me an education. His promise had certainly gone a good way to being fulfilled. Learning, in this case, was not exactly a growth experience, and I began to wonder whether it would not have been better if I had not foregone Lister's offer of education. Even in such miserable circumstances, it is difficult to refute one's own life, and despite the present situation, I found it difficult to wish it had not happened. Somehow the circumstances of my life were the only things which seemed
real to me. Without them I had no datum point, no place of reference. My reality was being shaped entirely by my affair with Lister and Alicia. Without it, I hardly existed at all.

I looked at my two companions and tried to guess who'd speak first. Both of them looked as though further speech was beyond their power. All of us were more exhausted by what was left unspoken that by what had been said. I decided that neither of them could break the spell, so I began to speak.

"The afternoon has taken its toll on my expectations concerning both of you. I don't think there is anything to be gained by me remaining here any longer."

Alicia looked at me with an expression of regret that revealed all her humanity.

"Daniel, believe me, I wish it could be some other way, any other way, than this. Your leaving will break my heart, but if you stay your life will be broken."

Lister sat impassionately, apparently paying little regard to our dialogue.

"Alicia, I don't want to leave, but I need time to think. I am, as you know, inexperienced in these things. I cannot decide to act this way or that as you or Acton can. I know how I wish it to be, but I need the space around the problem to try and piece it together. I honestly
do not know if your fatalism is well-founded or not. I know your life is more complex than mine appears to be, but is it not possible that these problems have overwhelmed you to such extent that you cannot see light even if it is there?"

"I wish it could be true, but I fear it cannot be. I see no hope for myself; whether there is any in the absolute sense is immaterial. If I can no longer accept hope, then for me it no longer exists. The world exists in ones head, whatever the mind establishes that is the truth. Whether you see the future optimistically or not will not make my own reality change."

As we spoke, Lister raised himself slowly and walked towards the unfinished painting of Alicia. He stood a few feet away from it and stared intently at it.

"You see, Daniel, nothing can change Lister's vision, not even his own destruction. He knows it is wrong, but he will not change. My telling him of the dangers, and in my opinion imminent destruction, cannot influence him. You have no access to his mind. It is closed to us and perhaps even to himself. Each one of us is a product of our own desires and convictions. They are not interchangeable and we cannot amalgamate them. Perhaps the best we can do is to defiantly go against them."

"Then, Alicia, you must go against your convictions
and follow mine. It cannot surely by worse than the course you have already chosen."

"Ah, Daniel, it is not so simple; to go against one's deepest convictions is to be defeated already. I will go against my better judgment and sit for Lister, but already it is doomed. I do it as one who is already lost; it has already ended for him, but he will not sense the ending until it happens."

I looked across at Lister. He certainly appeared to justify Alicia's predictions. He was captured by his overriding need to paint Alicia. His trance-like state precluded any possibility of his recognizing the futility of his attempts. I was glad that I, even in my adjacent misery, was not so irreconcilable to reality. The subjectivity of this belief was, I began to realize, something of a problem. For while I was convinced of my ability to perceive the situation as reasonably as possible, I began to realize that Alicia considered me to be on the same level as Lister. Unless I submitted to her demands for our separation, then she would see me in exactly the same light in which she viewed Lister. Whichever way I moved, I was doomed to failure. If I acquiesed to her demands, I would lose her forever. If, on the other hand, she submitted to my demands, she would view me as she saw Lister. To her, the thing would be already dead and she'd
simply be biding time until the physical end occurred.

This was indeed a living hell. We would all be tortured whatever decisions were made. According to Alicia, the final destruction was inevitable so all we were doing was choosing between the methods of torture.

I was persuaded by this conclusion that it was time for me to depart. The longer I stayed, the more mired down I would become. The atmosphere of Lister's studio was not conducive to solution. The Indian statues seemed to leer down from their niches; I saw no sympathy in their eyes, only contempt.

"I will leave now, Alicia. I must think on everything that has been said."

"It will be just as well, Daniel. It hurts me to see you so pained, but you must see it through as best as you see fit."

I looked towards Lister. He was still engrossed in his personal nightmare. I addressed him.

"Acton, I will leave now. Nothing good will come of me staying here any longer. I am sorry for the harsh words that passed between us; it is, I fear, a result of the things that are happening to us. We are becoming a product of the pressures building up in the triangle we have created. I will go now and spend some time by myself. I need to reflect on what is happening to us."

"Daniel, you are the finest fellow I ever met and I appreciate your friendship more than you can imagine. We must not allow ourselves to be separated by this business. All any of us have is each other. We have bound ourselves together; if we cut loose the bonds, I cannot see anything but isolation and loss resulting."

This attempt to ameliorate the wounds we'd caused each other had a calming effect on all three of us. After going through the storm, we now lay wasted and emptied. It was a time for reconciliation, not fighting.

I said goodbye to Lister and kissed Alicia on the mouth. As I drew near to her, I faded into her being. By the time our lips touched, I no longer existed. She pulsed through me, mingling with my hot blood.

Using all my strength, I began to pull away from her and regain my own being. I moved towards the door and turned the handle; the door opened and the outside air gushed in. I turned and looked at Lister and Alicia one last time. Already they were distorted by the distance I was from them. I could no longer make out all of their features; they were like figures on an old, faded canvass. The atmosphere of the corridor seemed hard and bright, and it hurt me as I moved along its length. The great gaping stairwell lay ahead, and as I proceeded down its steps, I clung to the bannister rail, being unsure of my
own ability to resist falling.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Each new day opened up like a great chasm before me. March winds were beginning to blow, and the rain lashed leaves whipped around street corners. I took to walking the streets of South Kensington, sometimes as late as midnight. Walking around in this weather was a therapeutic experience; it gave me the sensation of companionship. The blustery winds and chill rain seemed to me to have a kind of empathy towards my state of mind. The ever-changing patterns of swirling leaves found a parallel in the chaotic thoughts roaming around my head.

It had been six days since I'd left Lister's house. Most of that time I had spent thinking of what had happened that afternoon and trying to translate it into something of comprehensible and manageable proportions. Hardcastle had looked after my physical well-being, and I was left to deal with my emotional state. During those six days, I learned little about solutions or answers, but I had begun to dig into my being. For the first time in my life I began to cut away at the rotten parts of my existence.
All the things which previously seemed so meaningful and important faded and then disappeared altogether. I was left with the unappealing but necessary revelation that much of what I imagined I was had turned out to be of no substance whatsoever.

I had not attempted to communicate with either Lister or Alicia. Indeed, after a few days of dire anguish, I began to see the benefits of solitude. All the time I was with people I was distracted with the business of knowing myself. Suddenly I realized for the first time in my life that I was existent even in isolation from everyone I know or everything I did. There was an essence which was indivisible; it could not be shaken by circumstances or what others thought. It was ironic that the desperate affair with Lister and Alicia should provoke me to this, my first steps in the investigation of my own life.

I suspected the inheritance I was about to receive was partially to blame for my preoccupation with the unimportant. Ever since I had realized I would inherit my uncle's estate, I had focused upon it as a point around which all other parts of my life revolved. Everything I did was shaped by the knowledge of my soon to be wealth. Others viewed me on the basis of it, and I even valued myself in terms of it. It had acted as a kind of shield behind which I remained free from real investigation. Now I had begun to cut through
the shield. It had been no defense or help in my affair with Alicia, and so I had taken the step of removing it. In consequence I felt like a turtle that had just had its shell forcibly removed. I felt vulnerable, but at the same time it was a unique opportunity to see what I was like without the shell.

I had not spent every second of the last few days in this form of mental exploration. I had, as a way of testing myself, been to a dinner engagement with the Shermans. Had it been any other family, I would have declined to go, but Mr. and Mrs. Sherman were two people who I could never find it in myself to dislike. They had, in a sense, adopted me as far as the social scene was concerned and had shown me every kindness imaginable. They were both in their fifties, and yet had maintained a kind of youthfulness rarely found in people half their age. Mrs. Sherman had sensed there was something wrong as soon as I arrived at the house. However, she did not molly-coddle me and try to 'elicit' the exact nature of my emotional condition. Instead, I was sheltered from the worst of the dinner guests and shepherded around the others. They were not a showy couple despite their wealth. Mrs. Sherman was unusual in her social group in that she actually understated rather that overstated. She was never overbearing and rarely imposed upon anyone. Of all the families I knew, theirs
was the one in whose company I felt most relaxed.

The day before I had received a letter from Edward Norton. He had been occupied with his father's business affairs for some days but hoped to be able to meet with me soon. I was still trying to decide whether I should meet with Edward or not. I could not decide whether I would gain anything from talking my problems over with him. I seriously doubted whether I would make a very good companion at the moment. I was not convinced that even Edward could raise my spirits. In the end I decided that it could not induce in me any more anguish than I was already feeling, and accordingly I wrote him a note expressing my desire to meet. I suggested we meet at Claridges for lunch this very same day. Hardcastle took on his role as a messenger and dispatched the note forthwith. I was, of course, totally unsure of Norton's schedule and didn't know if the time or place would be convenient at all. Whether he could meet or not, I decided that the best thing I could do would be to go for a walk. I looked out of the window, and it appeared that the rain had ceased falling. The ground was still sodden and the fast-moving clouds still gray, but these were not conditions to deter one such as myself. I prepared myself for immediate departure.

As I walked down the pavement, the cold wind tugged at my face and it wasn't long before my ears and nose were
both numb with cold. I was glad it was cold; it invigorated my flagging spirits and forced me to fight back against the elements. I passed no one as I walked towards the common which was situated about a quarter of a mile from my lodgings. The turf was heavy with the recent rainfall. It was not, however, green as one might expect; instead it had a burnt brown appearance. The constant wind and rain had damaged the blades of grass with their force and left them lifeless and sodden.

I squelched over the common following the line of beech trees which ran along one edge of the whole area. The common was completely empty save for the crows wheeling overhead. There were no dogs, no people, just myself. It was this feeling of isolation which made me go on these walks so often. The huge open spaces helped put my mental condition into some sort of perspective. It did not save it or indeed lessen it, but it helped to put it into scale.

The only problem with these solitary walks was my tendency to wish Alicia was there with me. I was sure that the sharp wind and the exhilaration of the experience would improve Alicia's condition no end. There was always something a little unfulfilling about experiencing something by oneself. I could not share my feelings and ideas as I felt them. It would have been better had I been able to join with Alicia in whatever I was feeling rather than
having to relate it second hand. It was much the same problem with letter writing. One did not get the same thrill from writing about something that happened as could be achieved by sharing the activity with the person.

Perhaps it was a little optimistic to think that Alicia and I could share any experience together. Even if we were walking side by side seeing the same things and hearing the same sounds, it is doubtful that we would both interpret them in the same way. It was quite conceivable that while I saw the common as a place of freedom she would see it as just the opposite. To her it would be just another prison, a place that held her from being somewhere else. I looked around the grass-covered rectangle that made up the common. It was surrounded on all four sides by roads and across those roads it was hemmed in by long rows of Mews type housing. From the center of the common, the lines of white houses looked like long high walls, the details of the houses being indistinguishable from this distance. The more I looked at them, the more they looked like walls, prison walls. This is how Alicia would see the place, I'm sure.

As I continued to walk, it was difficult to forget this new view of the common. The irritation it generated was sufficient to ruin the experience entirely. I walked a few more paces and decided to turn around and return
home. I looked down at the ground as I walked, trying to avoid the walls around the common. I comforted myself with the notion that I was returning home because my feet were beginning to feel cold and damp. I would take a bath upon my arrival at the lodgings and then it would be time to depart for my appointment with Edward Norton.

Things went according to plan. I took a hot bath, read the paper for awhile and then there was barely enough time for my journey. I had not been to Claridges for months and under normal circumstances I would have been excited at the prospect of dining there. Today, however, not even the thought of seeing Edward would lift me to any perceptible level of excitement. It seemed that everything I did was just an attempt to escape from my own thoughts. Hardcastle arranged for a cab and within a few minutes I had departed. The journey was rather unpleasant, and I was glad when it was over. The wind buffeted the sides of the carriage during most of the journey, causing the windows to rattle. The strength of the wind and my delayed departure meant that I arrived late.

I found Edward Norton in the bar. He appeared to be reading some sort of shareholders' reports or something of a similar nature.

"Edward, I'm sorry to be so late. With this wretched wind, one should be grateful to arrive at all. How are
you? Still keeping up the pretense of being interested in business, I see."

"Well yes, one has to make the effort, Daniel. A good drink is about the only way to fortify oneself against the dullness of such things, I'm afraid. Sit down for a few minutes and have a drink yourself before we go in."

I ordered a drink and sat down.

"Daniel, I must say you don't look too well. How have you been keeping?"

"Well, I've had one or two things on my mind, I will admit."

"Let me guess, it has something to do with that woman we met in the restaurant a few weeks ago."

"Well, yes, actually I'm afraid it does, but it's nothing that I should bother you with."

"Nonsense, dear fellow, I wish to hear all about it, and I'm sure it will do you some good. Before you start to tell me anything, let's make our way to the restaurant."

We made our way from the bar and into the restaurant. It was a grand place in the splendor of the old style. Its huge glittering chandeliers cast sparkling particles of light throughout the room. We were shown to a table which bordered one of the walls of the restaurant. The restaurant was only about half full as many diners had already left after an early lunch. We ordered our food, although I did
not feel particularly hungry, and Edward once again questioned me on the reason for my low spirits.

"Well, Edward, I feel as though I have become involved with something of which I'm not fully in control. Alicia has captured me in a way which I had never considered possible, and I'm afraid I don't see any pleasant way out of it. If I try to leave her and never see her again, I'll be eternally miserable; if I stay and try to develop a relationship with her, I know it will fail."

"Does she love you, Daniel? If she does, then surely there is some way for you to resolve the issue."

"That is exactly how I thought when I first knew her, but now I'm not so sure that anything can be changed. I believe she does love me in her way. The trouble is that her way is not very optimistic. She has no confidence in her ability to find happiness and so everything she does is tainted by a belief in the imminent failure of all she does." 

"Yes, I can see that would be a problem. Do you know much about her background and what kind of things would have caused her to be like this?"

"Well, I know something of her situation." I did not wish to tell Edward about Alicia's morphine addiction as I feared this might turn him against her in some way.

"Perhaps, Daniel, I should tell you of something which
I fear you do not know, and it may help you to see things a little more clearly. Ever since I met Miss LaFelice, she has troubled me, and I have not been able to get her out of my mind. Well, in any case, to get on with the story do you remember my Uncle Bertie?"

"Yes, of course I do. He must be one of the most knowledgeable people on the London scene."

"He is not one of the most knowledgeable, he is the most knowledgeable. Well, I asked him if he'd ever heard of Miss LaFelice. He sat thinking for awhile and then he told me a most extraordinary story. I am going to tell you the story, Daniel, because I believe it will help you in some way with your present dilemma. Do you remember Sir David Ridgemont?"

"Yes, of course I do. He died about three years ago. He is rumored to have committed suicide although I seem to remember that the official version was that he died in a hunting accident."

"You have the salient points, Daniel. My Uncle Bertie assures me that he did commit suicide and that the family knew it and covered it up to avoid a scandal. Now the question is did you not wonder why he committed suicide?"

A sudden heat ran into my face as I began to realize that Alicia was going to fit into the picture somewhere.

"Surely you can't mean that Alicia had something to
"By all accounts, Ridgemont was madly in love with Miss LaFelice, but she would not reciprocate his love. Most found this particularly odd and hard to believe as he was rich and she virtually a pauper. Anyway, rumor has it that she refused to be his mistress because she had some sort of morals regarding Ridgemont's wife. The upshot of the story is that he, unable to bear life without her, shot himself with his own gun, intending it to look like a hunting accident. The ploy would have worked if it had not been for one of the gamekeepers who claims he saw Ridgemont shoot himself."

"So you are telling me that Alicia is responsible for the death of a married man."

"Not at all, dear fellow, I'm not saying she was responsible, but the incident does presumably have some bearing on her behavior in this affair with you."

"But surely she doesn't imagine I'm like Sir David Ridgement? For a start, I'm not married..."

"No, no, I don't imagine she thinks you are the same at all. But obviously it is a painful memory to her, and I'm sure she dreads the thought of any possible reoccurrence. Besides, my story is not finished. My uncle had further information to impart. I know this may come as a shock to you should you be unaware of it already, but did you know Alicia
is a morphine user?"

"Yes, I do know that. Surely it is not common knowledge all over London?"

"Indeed not, my uncle is privy to things few other mortals know about."

"Next I suppose you will tell me her morphine addiction has something to do with Ridgemont."

"In a manner of speaking, yes, it does. After Ridgemont's death, Alicia withdrew from society altogether, and nobody saw much of her, but I happen to know what happened to her. Due partly to the grief and misery of Ridgemont's death and partly because she failed to look after herself properly, she became ill. She did nothing to prevent the illness, no doubt feeling that God was punishing her for Ridgemont's death. The long and the short of the thing is that she developed pneumonia. By the time a doctor was called in, she was near to death and desperate measures were required to save her life. During her recovery, the doctor prescribed morphine for the extreme chest pains she was feeling. From that day nearly three years ago to this, she has been addicted to morphine."

"Oh my God, Edward, how was I to know? You can't imagine what misery I have put that poor creature through. How she must ache inside and how much worse I must have made her feel by the pressure I put on her. You cannot
imagine how awful I feel. What can I do to amend the situation?"

"I fear there is little you can do. If she does love you as you think, then perhaps that is the greatest happiness she will ever be able to find in this world. I fear, however, that she will never be able to be part of a relationship with one she loves. The gamble such an endeavor would entail for one who has been through so much would have too great a price to pay should she fail."

"The trouble is, Edward, that she already feels that she has failed. She sees no hope of success, and the thing is already condemned in her mind. What should I do, Edward? Now I have heard this story, I cannot but do what seems best for her. I cannot try to find my own needs in her any longer. Now I realize how terrible it must have been for her while Lister and I made all our demands on her."

"It is a sorry mess, Daniel, and I see no easy way for either of you. However, as far as Lister is concerned, I suspect he knows of Miss LaFelice's history and still goes ahead with his plans for her."

"If that is true, then he commits a heinous crime which I cannot forgive him for. I will stop him from torturing her further if it's the last thing I do."

"That is well-spoken, Daniel, but before you do so, you must determine that you will also stop torturing her. I realize it is different with you, but it is Alicia you need
"Yes, you have a point there, and I suppose I should think more carefully before I judge Lister. After all, he is just as much a victim of needs as I am. He might have known about Alicia's past, but that probably doesn't make it any easier for him. He's more obsessed by his nightmares than any of us. Lister's problems are compounded by his attitude about life in general. His emotional state conflicts with his theoretical position about how he wants to be. He is being continually torn between what he wants to be and what he actually is."

"Be that as it may, he certainly isn't acting in a way which is conducive to ending the affair in the best way possible."

Ever since Edward's disclosure about Alicia I had lost my appetite altogether. Consequently, I had eaten little of the food I'd ordered. Edward had scarcely done better.

"Well, I'm afraid we have ruined our appetites completely by this conversation. I'm sorry for bringing it up at such an inopportune time, but the matter has weighed heavily upon me, and you are the only person I would consider talking to on the subject."

"I only wish it wasn't you, Daniel, that was involved in the whole business, but it's too late to wish that now. The beast is already upon you."
"The odd thing is, Edward, that despite this wretched business with Lister and Alicia, I don't think I could have wished for it to have been different. Well, I suppose I would have preferred it to be less fraught with danger, but what I mean is that I could not have wished to be someone else rather than me. It seems so difficult to subtract parts of one's life and still be the same person. Who knows how I would have been had I not been through this thing. Undoubtedly, I wouldn't be the same as I am now. I'm sure I would be much happier, but then on the other hand, perhaps I wouldn't be. Who knows, I'd probably be preparing myself for the life of a mill owner were it not for the distraction caused by my feeling towards Lister and Alicia."

"Well, to be honest with you, Daniel, I think I'd prefer to be a mill owner rather than have this type of thing happen very often."

"I am hoping it isn't going to repeat itself with any kind of regularity. I definitely wouldn't be able to stand the strain."

"Well, I don't know about you, Daniel, but I am beginning to feel the strain of sitting here looking at all this unfinished food. I suggest that we adjourn to the bar for awhile."

"That sounds a good idea to me."

We paid our bill and left for the bar. As I followed
Edward it occurred to me that it should really be Edward that this whole business was happening to. If people had learned of the affair and not been told which of us was involved, I'm sure they would, with one accord, assume it was Edward, not myself, who was involved. I had never really done anything exciting or daring, whereas he was constantly involved in various exploits. All in all, I was quite unsuited for the role of tragic hero. I possessed none of the qualities of a hero and was naturally more likely to compromise than boldly fight against all the odds. One can only assume it was all a result of chance and inexperience.

I stayed with Edward for another hour, and we sat drinking and talking. He tried as best he could to raise my spirits, but it was not an easy task. He also failed to make me decide on a plan for the best possible solution to my problem. I am by nature a "wait and see" person, and this tendency increases with the difficulty of the problem. Consequently, this scenario had left me feeling as though it were impossible to make any kind of decision. Drifting along with the tide did not provide an alternative solution, but it did avoid the moment when something would have to be done.

After I left Edward, I decided it would be a good idea if I walked down to a private gallery shop. I had no particular interest in buying anything and was hardly in a
mood to appreciate art, but it seemed a better idea than simply going home and sitting brooding in the study. After all, there would be plenty of time for that activity later in the day.

The short walk was mostly downhill, and yet I soon began to feel the effort of the task. It wasn't so much that I was physically exhausted as that I was unable to draw together my strength to do anything. It was bad enough thinking about Alicia day and night, but my misery was compounded by my having just left my best friend, Edward. Not only was he my best friend, at the moment he seemed like my only friend. With this conclusion upmost in my mind, I turned the corner into the street where the gallery was situated.

As I grew nearer to its large shop window, I began to have second thoughts about entering. Visiting the gallery was supposed to be a distraction, but at the moment the thought of entering the shop was far from distracting. I stood by the window and looked inside. It looked, in my present mood, more imposing than the hatters that I had visited weeks before. For once I was able to make a decision; I would not go in. The experience of entering was, I judged, far more upsetting than the prospect of going home and feeling sorry for myself. After all, if I went inside the gallery, I would have to pretend I was interested
in art in general or their paintings in particular. I would probably attempt to engage in conversation with one of the employees whose sole interest in me as a person was due to the fact that he wanted me to buy a painting. Then I would be forced to continue the farce by appearing interested and assuring the fellow that I'd return after giving the matter some further thought. The employee would undoubtedly realize I was lying but would thank me anyway and hope to see me again.

No, the thought of engaging in some farcical theatrical production was just too much for me at the moment. It would be better for me to forego the chance to see some mediocre paintings and instead sit at home staring blankly into the small fire. Already the thought of being by the fire away from everything and everybody was beginning to gain considerable appeal in my mind. Accordingly I hailed the first available cab and proceeded towards home.

As I drove towards my lodgings, I began to wonder if I shouldn't go home via Acton Lister's house. It would be but a small diversion and cause me little inconvenience. I wouldn't stay long; I would just see how he was and perhaps Alicia would be there as well. Yes, I was sure Alicia would be there. She had agreed with Lister to continue to sit for his painting. As I thought of the perfect form of Alicia lying naked before Lister while he fulfilled his every
passion within the painting, I grew angry and was soon convinced that it was my duty to rescue Alicia from both Lister and perhaps herself. I had rapidly changed my reason for visiting Lister's studio, but it was not for a further few minutes that I realized what was happening to me.

Fortunately, the cab was nearer to my lodgings by now than I had expected. It was a little too late to make a diversion to Lister's without going considerably out of my way. I concluded that it was a great blessing that my mind had been made up for me on the subject of visiting Lister's studio. I had thought of the idea by chance so it seemed, but that idea had rapidly changed to an almost obsessive need to go and see what Alicia and Lister were doing. I was becoming a victim of jealousy, something I did not wish to be. After all, if Alicia did love me as I thought, then I hardly needed to be jealous of Lister. He did not love Alicia, he simply needed her in terms of his need to paint her and somehow achieve something he'd never done before.

On the other hand, if Alicia did not love me, then the problem was, for the large part, solved. I would not badger her if she could not reciprocate my feelings. I was determined not to be another Sir David Ridgemont in her life.

This process of analyzing my situation had the benefit of convincing me that it would have been a horrible mistake to arrive at Lister's house in this frame of mind. I was
quite relieved that occasionally I was still able to see reason rule over impetuosity. The issue was finally settled by the cab's arrival at my lodgings. I got out feeling as though I'd won a great battle, albeit in a war which I still couldn't anticipate winning. The heady feeling of victory soon wore off as I climbed the steps to the lodgings and entered. Hardcastle was nowhere to be seen. I was alone. He had lit the gas lamps and recently put coal on the fire so I suspected that his absence was temporary.

I stood with my back to the open fire, absorbing the warmth. The cab had been particularly drafty, and I was chilled to the marrow. As I stood there, I wondered if every day from now on would be so filled with my preoccupation for Alicia. I had never spent so much time dwelling on one thing before I met her. It was a difficult time but one which certainly opened up new areas of my consciousness. It seemed to me that misery was a far more engrossing subject than happiness. People who were happy were just that; I doubted that they sat around all day thinking about their happiness, and I'm sure they didn't discuss it with their friends day and night. On the other hand, misery was a much more involved process. It involved the continual search for solution; it asked the question 'why?'. It was retrospective; it made the past events as important as the present ones and saw no view of the future moment
which wasn't shaped by that misery. Misery was, by far, the most compelling of the two states, and it was all that was needed to fill the idle mind. I suspected that no one had ever been bored by being miserable whereas happy people were, I found, usually the most boring and idiotic individuals I'd encountered. They were usually smug, self-satisfied people who'd done all there was to do and then sat around all day being happy. Most people I knew who claimed to be happy were usually so because either they did nothing which was in any way likely to be unpleasant or they viewed everything from behind rose-colored glasses. They were not to be trusted, that's to be sure. To trust somebody who smiled day and night was to be fooled into believing that everything in the world was just dandy. I was, speaking from my own experience, quite convinced that everything wasn't fine and dandy.

At this juncture in my meditations, I was interrupted by the closing of the front door. Hardcastle had returned. I listened to his approaching footsteps, and before long he had knocked on the study door and was entering. One could always tell Hardcastle by his knock. It was one of those knocks which was firm but not loud. It showed restraint and was in many ways the epitome of Hardcastle's personality.

"Good afternoon, Hardcastle. What rampage have you
been on?"

"Rampage, sir?"

"Well, it's just a way of speaking. I was merely enquiring as to the nature of your voyage."

Hardcastle obstinately refused to be drawn into my banter.

"Oh, now I understand your meaning, sir. I have been to see the butcher."

"The butcher? I hardly realized he was a close acquaintance of yours, Hardcastle. How charming that you mix with tradespeople."

"I'm afraid, sir, that I was visiting the butcher on a matter of business. I certainly do not know him in any other capacity."

"Yes, I can believe that. I was merely jesting."

"Oh, I see, it was a joke."

"Yes, it was, but perhaps it would be best if we didn't pursue the jest any further."

"Very well, sir."

This discussion on the domestic front was quite appealing at the moment, and I felt the desire to continue it. It didn't seem at all dangerous, and it was a diversion from the heavier subject matter I had preoccupied myself with of recent times.

"So tell me about your trip to the butcher's."
"Well, sir, you may or may not have noticed that of recent times there has been a deterioration in the quality of the meat purchased from Mr. Jones' establishment."

"Well, actually, I must confess to not having noticed the deterioration, but if you say it exists then I am sure it does."

"It does indeed exist, and I decided it should either exist no longer or Mr. Jones would no longer benefit from passing his second-rate meat onto us."

"Well done, Hardcastle. One has to teach those tradesmen a lesson or two before one can get an ounce of sense out of them at all."

"The upshot of the whole affair is that Mr. Jones has agreed to personally supervise the cutting and packaging of the meat we purchase."

"I'm sure everything will be satisfactory from now on. No doubt the fault lay with some dim-witted minion."

"I have on occasion noted the presence of a rather sullen youth who looked most out of place in the said establishment. No doubt it is he who is responsible for the failing quality of the meat. Will there be anything you require, sir? Tea, perhaps?"

"That would be most welcoming, Hardcastle. Thank you."

Hardcastle strode imperiously out of the study. He had the visage of one who'd just gained complete victory
over the tradesmen's class. No doubt he saw Mr. Jones as the champion of their cause and himself the champion of the more civilized class of butlers.

No sooner had Hardcastle departed than the gravity of my predicament returned upon me, and the momentary attempt at jocularity faded into the past. I began to think of Alicia once more. Despite my penchant for procrastination, I decided to do something to push the matter in one direction, for that matter any direction as long as something was done. I failed to see how I could possibly do anything of a constructive nature unless I saw Alicia in person. The thought of a reoccurrence of my last meeting with Alicia and Lister was enough to make me determined not to visit Lister's studio in order meet Alicia. It was quite clear to me that if I was to see Alicia at all it would have to be in a more conducive environment and without Lister's presence.

With this in mind, I decided on a plan. Taking some notepaper from the bureau, I began to write a letter to Alicia.

"Dearest Alicia,

I hope the arrival of this note does not upset you or make things worse between us. I felt it was best that I did not come to see you at the studio as I know this only compounds your difficulties. I do need to see you, Alicia, not because
I wish to coerce you or put any pressure on you at all, but because we need to communicate. No purpose will be served by either of us trying to ignore the other. Whatever is to become of us must be determined by us and not simply be a result of us not seeing each other.

We have to meet and discuss things between us. I will abide by whatever is decided, so you have no need to fear. Rather than repeat the disastrous meeting at Lister's, I propose that I meet you somewhere else. I know you will not allow me to come to your house, so I suggest we meet outside. If it is not inconvenient, I would like to meet you at two o'clock p.m. tomorrow by the south entrance to Hyde Park. You do not need to respond to this letter; I will wait for you whether you come or not. Please try to come if at all possible. I yearn to see you.

Yours with undying affection,

____

I read over the letter and was about to rip it up and start again when Hardcastle entered with the tea. The lateness of the hour and Hardcastle's sudden entrance discouraged me from attempting any revisions of the letter, and I dispatched him immediately with the letter exhorting him to make sure it reached Miss LaFelice personally.

I sat drinking the tea Hardcastle had produced. The only sound that I could hear was the ticking of the clock.
The fire was lit but remained strangely silent. Every minute that passed after Hardcastle's departure seemed like hours. It was impossible to relax, and I found myself in a state of nervousness that I had experienced only once before. When I was ten years old, I sat for a piano exam and played everything appallingly. The sensation I was undergoing now was very similar to that which I experienced as I waited my turn before going into the examination room. A feeling of dread of uncontrollable anxiety welled up in me. The passage of time only increased its strength until I considered that I was equally a victim of 'angst' as the German philosophers that coined the term.

It was 7:30 p.m. before Hardcastle returned. The instant I heard the key turn in the lock, I rushed out into the hallway to greet him.

"At last, Hardcastle, you have returned. I feared you had been attacked and left for dead in some dark alley."

"That is a rather unlikely possibility, sir, as the journey to Mr. Lister's house does not necessitate the navigation of any dark alleys."

"Well, yes, of course I was merely jesting. But what of the note? Did Miss LaFelice receive it?"

"As far as I know she did, sir. I handed it to Mr. Lister's butler who assured me that the said lady was present and that she would receive the correspondence immediately."
Fearing there was little further I could do in ensuring the letters safe arrival, I departed.

"Very good, Hardcastle. You did everything that was necessary. Thank you."

"Will you be eating at home this evening, sir?"

"Yes, I expect so, but I am not excessively hungry so something light will suffice."

"Very good, sir. The meal will be ready in about half an hour if that is convenient."

"That will be just right, Hardcastle, thank you."

Hardcastle disappeared, and I was left with a thirty minute space to fill. I paced around the room for awhile, looking around at the furnishings as if they were somehow new to me. Finally my attention was attracted to the pile of letters which had found a resting place on the mantle piece. I picked them up. Most had been opened but three or four, obviously from Jamieson and Cartwright, the lawyers, had not. For want of anything better to occupy myself with, I opened them one by one and read their contents. The first three that I read were the usual financial statements and the such like. The last one was somewhat different and certainly more interesting. The honorable firm of lawyers wished to inform me that due to their judicious use of my small annuity, they had entered into a number of speculations and had through their expediency netted a considerable profit
on my behalf. They made it sound as if they had done it out of the goodness of their hearts and that I should be forever grateful. They omitted to mention the fact that they received a handsome commission for their noble endeavors.

The result of this wheeling and dealing was that the remaining four months of my annuity would be three times as large as usual. Under other circumstances, I would have greeted this news with considerable joy and a great deal of expenditure. At the moment, I was mildly aware of its advantages but did not anticipate a change in my habits. The issue of money, normally one of importance to me, had ceased to exist. My mind was totally preoccupied with my love for Alicia. The fact that I had a few pounds more to spend had little bearing on my existence at the moment. I did, however, consider it a poor show on the part of the lawyers to make this profit at such a late hour. I had spent what seemed like forever living on a pittance, and just when I was about to receive my uncle's entire estate, they pull off a trick to lift me from my poverty.

After Hardcastle's return, I began to feel a sense of accomplishment which took the place of my earlier nervous indecision. For the first time in many days, I found myself sufficiently relaxed to be able to do some reading. I determined that I would devote the rest of the evening to the task of reading some worthwhile tome. Before I was able
to commence this task, Hardcastle entered with my supper, and I occupied myself with the twin tasks of perusing the evening paper and eating.
I awoke quite suddenly and without the usual period of gray half-perception which usually precedes one's entrance into a new day. Almost immediately I felt fully awake and needed no time to be up and out of bed. I swung back the curtains and felt the chill layer of air which hung between them and the window. It was a cold morning, but the sky was bright with very few clouds blocking out the blue. It bode well for the rendezvous I was to have with Alicia later in the day. Already I began to ponder what I would wear and what time I should arrive at the park. Should I arrive early? Undoubtedly I would arrive earlier than two o'clock, but how much earlier? Whenever I met a friend, I always tried to get there before they did; it was always more relaxing to be there and know that they were late and you were the one that could assure them that it was of no matter when they apologized for their lateness. Of course, I would not maintain such a smug sense of satisfaction with Alicia if she were late. Indeed, I had absolutely no guarantee that she would come at all.
This thought that she might not come hit me for the first time. There was no real reason to suppose she would come. I began to think I should have asked for a reply; at least I would have known what to expect. The calm reassurance I'd gained by asking to meet Alicia was now displaced by the realization that I may end up waiting and waiting and she would never arrive.

I spent the rest of the morning in a state of severe restlessness which was evidenced in the almost audible beating of my pounding heart and my constant need to know what time it was. The time, needless to say, passed with an interminable slowness which drove me very close to the borders of insanity.

Even the most rigorous and complicated tasks which I embarked upon took so little time to complete that it hardly seemed worth beginning them in the first place. Finally, by dint of effort and considerable tedium, I managed to pass away the morning. I dressed for the outing far too early and was forced to sit around in the study in clothes which were, to say the least, unpleasantly cumbersome and hot for indoor attire. By the time I departed the lodgings, I was glad to be going outside with or without the promise of meeting Alicia.

The weather, against all odds, had stayed fine. It was a typical breezy March day. As the cab made its way
to Hyde Park, I sat upright, scarcely relaxing a single muscle. By the time the cab reached the edge of the great open park, I felt the strain of maintaining the tense posture that my nervousness had demanded. The fifteen minute journey had taken what seemed like hours, and I leapt out of the cab before it had barely come to a halt. I quickly paid the driver, caring little for the change, and marched out across the sprawling green of Hyde Park. Unlike most of London's parks and commons, Hyde Park is devoted almost entirely to grass. It does not have the huge manicured flower beds of the others, nor is it abundant with rows of elms, oaks, sycamores, or beech trees. It is, in fact, like a vast field bordered on all sides by the metropolis.

As I marched along at almost breakneck speed, I realized that I had no idea of the time. I took out my pocket watch and was alarmed to find that it was only twenty minutes before two o'clock. I was, as I feared I would be, terribly early. Accordingly, I slowed down my walking pace, hoping that the last fifty yards would take twenty minutes to walk. Obviously, this calculation was based on supreme optimism, and within a few minutes I had arrived at the stone entrance way.

I paced nervously up and down, looking at my pocket watch frequently. Eventually, after a good deal of walking to and fro, it struck two. I began to think of the best
way to prepare for Alicia's arrival. Best to sit down, I thought. The last thing I wanted was to make Alicia nervous by my own nervousness. I sat down on a nearby bench which had a good view of the approach to the gateway and waited. There were few pedestrians this afternoon, but I scrutinized everyone of them, imagining each one to be Alicia. After six or seven strollers had passed by, I began to fear that Alicia was not going to come. I became gripped with uncontrollable misery. If I had had a mirror available, I'm sure it would have showed my face to be ashen in color. The previous ruddiness whipped up by the wind would, I'm quite sure, have been washed away by pallidness. It was obviously foolish of me to ever imagine that Alicia would agree to meet. After all, she had made it quite clear she believed that no good would come from us meeting. She believed that any relationship we had was already doomed and its perpetuation or extension could only worsen the situation. As I contemplated this reality, I gave up my vigil and contented myself with staring miserably at the ground.

As I sat with my head resting on my hands, oblivious to all around, I suddenly became aware of approaching footsteps. By the time I looked up, Alicia was barely four or five feet away from me. I jumped up immediately and caught her hand, kissing it furiously.

"Please, Daniel, someone might see us."
"Alicia, you came! I had given you up and was contemplating the anguish I would undergo if I never saw you again."

"Calm yourself, Daniel. It's barely five minutes past two. Have you been waiting long?"

"No, not at all, but I'm afraid I lost all track of time and imagined it to be much later."

Alicia was breathtaking. Even in her winter coat and fur stole, she radiated beauty.

"Shall we walk away while we talk? That way we won't get cold."

"Yes, certainly, that will be delightful."

The idea of walking alone with Alicia overjoyed me. The thought of everyone seeing us together like this was enough to drive out all my misery.

As we began to walk along one of the paths leading into the park, Alicia put her arm through mine, and we became as one. I was scarcely able to talk, such was the excitement her nearness generated within me.

"So, Daniel, what have you to tell me?"

"Well, Alicia dearest, I can't think of a single thing now I'm with you. Simply being with you is quite sufficient."

"Come now, Daniel, don't flatter."

"It is no flattery, I can assure you, but yes I did want to talk to you. I have had no idea of what has been happening
to you, and it was driving me mad. Of course, I could have come round to Acton's but I did not wish to cause you any misery after the events of our last meeting."

"It is kind of you to think of me in that way, Daniel. I have been thinking of you all the time, and I must admit that when I received your note I was overjoyed at the prospect of seeing you again. As far as Acton is concerned, it is as I foretold it would be. Acton has deteriorated greatly since you last saw him. He rarely goes out and when he does it is to the most appalling opium dens. He spends his days in his darkened studio doing God knows what. I do fear for him; he is terribly changed."

"Dearest Alicia, I fear for you. Surely it is dangerous for you to continue to sit for the painting."

"It would be more dangerous should I not continue to sit for the painting. Besides, it is nearly finished and then I will go no more. But what of yourself, Daniel? How have you been?"

"Frankly, I have been wretched without you, but let's not think of what has passed. It is as though it never existed now I am with you."

"Daniel, you should not put too much store by our meeting. It still does not change the situation and my belief that we cannot succeed."

"Alicia, I am sure you will think differently when you
realize that I am not going to be a part of what you have already suffered in the past."

"What are you talking about, Daniel?"

"Alicia, I know about Sir David Ridgemont and the reason for your morphine use."

"How dare you pry into my private affairs! Who in God's name gave you the right to interfere with things that are none of your business? I will not have it, Daniel! You had absolutely no right!"

Alicia pulled herself away from me and began to cry.

"Alicia, believe me, I did not pry as you say. I was told by a well-meaning friend. Besides, I hoped it would be better for you if you knew that I know of your reasons and fears about our relationship. Honestly, Alicia, I only mention the past so that we can build our future without becoming victims to the past."

"Oh, so now you know of my past you imagine that all our problems are solved and that we can live happily ever after. You don't seem to realize that a man died because he loved me. If you think I'm going to compound the uselessness of his death by marrying the first person I fall in love with then you are very much mistaken."

For a few seconds I was breathless and unable to respond to Alicia's vitriolic outburst.

"I didn't mean that everything would be fine just because
I know about your past. I simply meant that it would help me to be what you need and not a burden to you."

"Well, that's nice. Because you know a few sordid details of my past you assume you can tailor your behavior to fit what you think I need. It all sounds a little patronizing, Daniel. I hope you don't mean it that way."

"Of course not, Alicia. Why on earth would I be patronizing or anything else for that matter? All I want is for us to be together."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry that I retorted so angrily. It's just that the subject of David Ridgemont is still one which haunts me, and when it's mentioned I become as you have just witnessed."

Alicia put her arm through mine again, and we continued to walk in silence. After some time, I noted that Alicia was slowing her walking pace. I thus directed her to a nearby bench where we sat and took in the view.

"Daniel, do not imagine that I do not appreciate your kindness; I do. It's just that everything is so difficult and I wish it weren't. I wish I could be like everyone else. There! Look at those two lovers; they are in perfect bliss."

The two lovers she referred to were a couple approaching on one of the many paths. They seemed at this distance to be totally entwined in each other as they walked to the extent that they almost appeared to be one.
"They look happy, I'll grant you that, but who knows what troubles lurk under their facade."

"Daniel, how pessimistic of you to not allow them their happiness."

"Exactly, Alicia. Bravo! You chastise me for ruining their happiness but isn't that exactly what you are doing to us? You are announcing the failure before it's had a chance to take place. You are not looking at the two individuals involved to judge the likelihood of success; instead you are prejudging their failure according to things which have nothing to do with either of them."

"I suppose you have a point, Daniel, but it is one you overestimate in value. After all, a person is almost entirely made up of their past experiences, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, I would assent to the theory that we are largely how we are because of our experiences. However, I differ from you in the fact that I do not believe that we are destined to become victims of our past."

Alicia did not reply immediately; instead she sat and looked out across the expanse of the green. Her eyes bespoke the difficulty of the situation. She wanted to believe but could not bring herself to do so. After what seemed like minutes but was probably only seconds, she spoke.

"Of course I want to believe what you say, but I am frightened. Frightened of the risk; it is too great."
"I know, Alicia, and I don't mean to push you. All I'm trying to do is show you the confidence I have in you."

"I know that, Daniel, and I am comforted by your belief in me, but we must remember that you are like it because you love me. It is because of love that you minimize some things and maximize others. Anyway, I am getting a little cold; can we walk for awhile?"

"Yes, of course, Alicia. I am sorry for not thinking; of course, you must be getting cold."

We continued to walk in a direction that would eventually bring us from the opposite direction, back where we started from. No matter how I tried, Alicia would not recant her view of the imminent failure of any affair she entered into. She assured me on a number of occasions of her love for me and swore there would never be anyone else. Despite the obvious sincerity and ardor of both our loves, it did not seem to improve the chances of us being happy together.

Eventually, after a distance further than I anticipated, we arrived at the entrance gates from which we had started.

"Will you take a cab with me, Alicia, to a cafe or restaurant for some tea?"

"I would love to, Daniel, but I'm afraid I have an appointment at 4:30, and it's already 4:00."

"I suppose it is an appointment with Lister."

"Come, Daniel, don't be petulant. It does not become
you. No, it isn't with Acton, and there would be absolutely no reason for you to be jealous even if it were."

As if to secure my acceptance of this statement, she bent over and kissed me on the cheek. Her lips felt hot on my cold skin, and I believed her the minute they touched. How ever rationally I tried to view our relationship, my powers of objectivity disintegrated whenever I touched or kissed Alicia. She had a force that everyone recognized. It was quite apparent, but that did not diminish my powerlessness and total subservience to its influence.

I finally regained my senses and hailed a cab for Alicia. I wanted her to see that I would not try to dissuade her of any of the convictions she held. It was not easy to let Alicia go without trying to drag some sort of promise from her, and yet it was the only way if I was ever going to convince her that I was not the same as Sir David Ridgemont or any other grim figure in her past.

"Well, Alicia, I suppose you should go."

I opened the door of the cab for her.

"Thank you, Daniel. You are being very sweet. Don't think that I don't appreciate everything that you are doing for me. I will send a note around to your lodgings in a few days when I have had time to think about everything you have said."

As Alicia was about to get into the cab, I kissed her
and held her for a few seconds and then let her continue to get into the cab.

"Thank you, Daniel. I do love you."

Before I could answer her, the cab moved off and I was left standing alone on the edge of the pavement. As the cab moved out into the steady stream of traffic, I had a strong urge to run after Alicia and beg her to come back. The uniformity of all the cabs made it difficult to see Alicia's for more than a few moments. Her disappearance reminded me of how, as a child, I used to throw twigs and branches into the fast flowing stream near our house. At first they were easily visible, but soon they merged in with all the other driftwood and were lost to sight, swirling down in the ever-moving stream towards invisibility.

I stood on the edge of the pavement for some while after Alicia disappeared. It was only after a cab pulled up in front of me imagining I wanted a ride that I walked back towards the park. I wandered around aimlessly for what seemed like hours, not realizing where I was going until eventually I reached another entrance to the park. It had grown considerably colder since Alicia had departed, and I, without realizing it, had become numb with the sharp evening air.

Hailing a cab was not as easy as I could have wished, for all the cabs were occupied by shoppers and city workers returning home. I stood stamping my feet on the ground,
trying to restore some feeling to my numb feet. Eventually an empty cab did come by, and I was able to shelter myself in its relatively warm interior.

By the time the cab reached my lodgings in South Kensington, the discomfort of sitting combined with the coldness in my limbs conspired to make me believe I was getting a cold. I felt the tell-tale signs of aching limbs and sore throat beginning and was convinced, by the time I reached the front door that I was doomed to suffer with a cold or even a fever.

I related the details of my physical state to Hardcastle, and he immediately prepared a suitable brew which he guaranteed would relieve the most persistent symptoms. Hardcastle was a genius when it came to solving the problems of everyday living. I was not, however, convinced of his abilities concerning affairs of the heart. I really don't think he would have understood my problems. In that sense, Hardcastle and I were like strangers. We could talk all day about the weather, my clothes, or his relatives, but we never really discussed each other. Indeed, I know precious little of Hardcastle's personal opinions and often got the idea that the opinions he did provide were very much tailored for my acceptance. Hardcastle was the archetypal manservant, and his opinions were cast in such a way so as to build upon this image. Hardcastle had succeeded beyond compare in his role and was the envy of all my friends whose own mediocre
staff they would have gladly swapped for Hardcastle.

Before I had barely settled in a chair by the fire, Hardcastle entered the study bearing a cup which he assured me contained a most efficacious elixir. Drinking the brew proved easier than I had anticipated and was in fact almost pleasurable. Hardcastle stayed in the room as I drank the tea as if to make sure I really did take my medicine.

"Hardcastle, you need not have troubled yourself with waiting till I'd drunk the beverage. I can assure you it was agreeable, and I had no intention of disposing of it otherwise."

"Sir, I did not suppose for a moment that you were liable to empty the cup by some other method than drinking. I was merely waiting in order that I might elicit your opinion on the drink. It is an old recipe which I believe was originally compounded by my great aunt. I have found it to be most rejuvenating and hoped you might find the same."

"I most assuredly do, Hardcastle. Your great aunt is to be praised for her efforts. The next time you see her I insist you convey my appreciation to her."

"I'm afraid that will be a little difficult, sir."

"Why?"

"Well, I'm afraid she has been dead for these last ten years."
"Oh, dear, Hardcastle, I'm most frightfully sorry."
"No need to be sorry, sir. Her tea lived on, and on the whole it was probably the best thing about her."

Hardcastle's reply shocked me greatly. It was unlike him to speak so of anyone, let alone a dead relative. On the other hand, perhaps he was not altogether serious. On occasions, Hardcastle was prone to attempting to imitate what he considered to be my sense of humor. Perhaps this was one of those occasions, and he was attempting to raise my spirits a little. I was unable to detect any change in his tone of voice or facial expression, and as he left the room I remained in doubt as to the nature of what had just taken place.

The problem did not remain a subject of thought for very long. The symptoms of ill health began to make themselves evident in every part of my body. Spreading like some insidious ivy, aches and pain crept from the center of my torso until even my fingers and toes were filled with feverish aching.

The effort of movement was the only thing that stopped me from dragging my ills off to bed. As it was, I felt incapable of any physical movement at all. Even the thought of walking was enough to exhaust me even further. I sat like a crumpled bundle, staring with sightless eyes into the red of the fire. The ills of the body had managed
to supercede the ills of the mind, and I was left without any particular feeling as to what had taken place that afternoon. In fact, I would go as far as to say that I had, if anything, developed a kind of gloomy satisfaction. Knowing that one has done everything possible in a situation leaves one feeling mildly contented even when failure is the most likely inevitability.

The fuzziness of mind precipitated by feverous headaches is sufficient to deflect one's most dire thoughts and turn them into half-conscious images which hold no particular threat. Despite my physical discomfort, I must have slipped into one of those fitful sleeps which lies somewhere between true sleep and wakefulness. The next conscious moment I could recounts was when Hardcastle's knock jolted me back into confused reality. My brain fought to understand what was happening. After what seemed like minutes but was probably seconds, I brought into focus all the details of my surroundings. Hardcastle stood rather bashfully before me, obviously recognizing the symptoms of confusion, and did not speak until I had shown enough signs of lucidity. Hardcastle advanced a few paces.

"Will there be anything else you need this evening, sir?"
"No, I don't think so, Hardcastle."
"Then I think I will retire for the night."
"It's a little early for bed, isn't it? Are you sick
or something?"

Hardcastle eyed me curiously and then looked in the direction of the carriage clock on the mantle piece. I followed his glance and was greatly surprised to see that it was already 10:30.

"Oh, dear! I'm afraid time has passed me by. I had no idea it was so late."

"Yes, sir. I suppose it is the fever. Perhaps you will start hallucinating next."

His face remained expressionless.

"Hardcastle, it is terribly difficult to know when you are jesting."

"I am quite serious, sir. It is often the case that those with fevers start ranting and raving and imagine all kinds of unpleasant things."

"You should have been one of Job's comforters, Hardcastle. You would have cheered the poor fellow up no end."

"Thank you, sir."

With this strange reaction to my assertion, Hardcastle bade me goodnight and left the room. This left me with the realization that I would have to somehow transport myself from study to bed chamber. With a burst of concentrated energy, I heaved myself from the depths of the Chesterfield and lurched off in the direction of the bedroom.
Most illnesses seem to follow a pattern. With colds and fevers, one always feels ghastly upon awakening, then we might trace a gradual lessening of symptoms as the day progresses. By late afternoon, the apex has been reached, and as the evening wears on, so returns the misery of illness.

Anticipating my condition to be as described, I woke as slowly and inconspicuously as possible, hoping to prove the theory wrong. To my great surprise, I felt none of the aches or pains of the previous evening. At first I thought I was hallucinating as Hardcastle had predicted. I leapt out of bed to test the strength of my apparently rejuvenated body. I was indeed cured. It must have been like this for the man whom Jesus miraculously cured of the palsy. I hopped around the room, trying to aggravate the sickness into reappearing. At last I was convinced that I was indeed miraculously cured.

The immediate advantage of this recovery was that I felt lucky or fortunate, and consequently my mood improved considerably over its recent state. The disadvantage of
my recovery was that I was now quite capable of resuming my deliberations over the affair with Acton and Alicia. Rather than dwell on this matter, I wracked my brains for something a little less serious. By process of elimination, I finally hit upon an idea. It was not exactly unrelated to my problems, but it had all the potential needed to waste a morning.

Acton Lister's exhibition was still on. He is not exactly the most consistent person, and I was rather surprised that he had managed to keep the exhibition alive for so long. I had thought of visiting the collection before but had been unable to go through with it. Now it seemed as though it would be just the thing. Acton would, no doubt, be gallivanting around somewhere else, thus avoiding the inevitable trauma that my meeting him would cause. In actual fact, I thought, it may be a good thing if he was at the gallery. It was important for me to come to terms with Lister. There was no point in avoiding him simply because I didn't feel capable of dealing with him. The sort of genuflection I always slipped into when with Lister was really quite unbecoming of one my age. Unless I saw Lister as an equal, I would never be able to suitably conduct myself in his presence.

The strength of this conviction was sufficient to spur me on to such an extent that I had completed my ablutions and was dressed before Hardcastle had time to come in and
prod me into a new day as he did most mornings. Hoping to catch Hardcastle unawares, I swung open the bedroom door and was about to charge out in search of the fellow. I did not have to search far; we collided midway through the door. Hardcastle was, rather unluckily for him, about to enter the bedroom at the precise moment I chose to fling the door open.

"My dear fellow, I am most frightfully sorry. I really am a clumsy oaf."

I tried desperately not to burst into laughter. Obviously the poor fellow was thoroughly shaken up by the experience. In one hand he was holding a tray which he was heroically trying to save from becoming a victim of our collision. It swung this way and then that, defying all the known laws of gravity. Finally he secured its balance and was able to speak.

"I was just bringing breakfast, sir. I thought you might like it in the bedroom."

"How on earth did you know I was up and about?"

"Well, hmm, I, er, I heard a good deal of banging around some while ago, and I assumed that you were in the process of rising."

"Damn you, Hardcastle, will I ever get the better of you?"

He looked at me questioningly.
"I'm sorry, sir. I had not realized you were trying to get the better of me. Had I known, then I would have sat in the kitchen until you surprised me."

"Well, that wouldn't exactly be the same, would it? It's not really a fair game when one of the players deliberately loses."

"No, sir, I suppose not. Perhaps you could surprise me by coming home unexpectedly later today."

"What makes you think I'm going anywhere?"

Hardcastle looked slightly embarrassed, but answered anyway.

"I took the liberty of assuming you were dressing so quickly because you had an appointment or some other activity which required you to rise as early and as hastily as possible."

"You are partly correct in your assertion, but it was not until I had leapt forth from my bed of sickness that I decided on a little pre-noon expedition."

All the time this conversation was taking place, we had both remained jammed in the doorway. A closer inspection of the tray Hardcastle had been juggling showed it to contain various breakfast comestibles, some of which were in great danger of becoming cold should they be left unconsumed any longer. I took the tray from Hardcastle and retreated back into the bedroom.

"You're right, Hardcastle, it was a very good idea. I
will eat in the bedroom."

I sat balancing on the edge of the bed, the tray by my side.

"I will go and see if The Times has arrived yet."

"Jolly good idea. I'm sure even my early rising could not pre-empt the arrival of The Times."

Hardcastle went to check as to its arrival. He returned triumphant, waving the paper before him. Browsing through the newspaper while eating breakfast was by far the most civilized way of beginning a new day. There was, however, a certain irony in the idea of consuming the world's news with its intrigues and plots at the same time as eating bacon and eggs. I was not sure whether the food or the politics were demeaned most by being swallowed in tandem with the other.

By the time I had indulged my interest in both news and food, it was late enough for me to depart for Lister's exhibition. For the first time that morning, I peered out into the street. Billowing white clouds filled the sky, but the streets were dry and bright. Instead of getting Hardcastle to call a cab, I would walk down to the nearby main road and procure one myself. I shouted out, hoping Hardcastle would be in hearing range. He was.

"I've decided to look for a cab myself, Hardcastle."

"Very well, sir. Perhaps I could advise you of the best place to locate one."
"No, that won't be necessary. I'll just keep walking till I find one, even if I have to walk the entire way."

Hardcastle stared at the ceiling and looked as though he were humoring my absurd whim.

"Very well, sir. Should I expect you for lunch?"

"No, I don't think so. I'll find something while I'm out."

Hardcastle frowned at my use of the word 'find'; he obviously found it unbecoming for a gentleman to 'find' food.

*   *   *

It was considerably milder outdoors than I had imagined it would be. Indeed, the air inside my lodgings was probably colder than the spring-like atmosphere of South Kensington. I entertained myself with the perusal of the various gardens I passed in pursuance of a cab. Each garden was different and did, I suspect, portray the likes and dislikes of the various gardeners employed by the households. At last I arrived at the "T" junction which I hoped would provide ample opportunity to solicit a cab.

After a few minutes without seeing a single cab, occupied or empty, I walked along the road in the direction of my destination. Heading towards the mecca, I began to ponder Alicia. The name slipped quite unwittingly into my mind.
It was a painful reminder of just how dependant I was on her. When the conscious forgot Alicia, the subconscious brought her back into the forefront of my mind. Quite obviously nothing had changed whatsoever; I was still a victim of my passions. Parallel to this situation was my attitude towards Lister. In many ways, I blamed Lister for Alicia's problems and her inability to accept me. Lister's presence at the exhibition would only inflame my passions further.

The relationship which Lister and I had originally embarked upon had certainly evolved a good deal. Who could have possibly known how things would have turned out? It struck me like a bolt of lightning. Lister quite conceivably did know how things would turn out. Granted, he may not have known the details of the thing, but it was not beyond him to have had something along these lines planned all along. Acton Lister was not the kind of man one could ascribe to being like this or being like that. I certainly did not know him well enough to say such things were beyond him.

The line of this argument was, for the time being, terminated by my sighting of a cab at about fifty yards distance. I leapt towards the curb and waved frantically. The cab grew ever larger and at last it arrived. I jumped inside with undue enthusiasm and gave the driver the directions. Wandering around looking for a cab and thinking of Alicia and Lister had consumed a considerable amount of time. It was now
eleven o'clock, and I had lost most of the advantages I had gained by rising so early.

Once inside the cab, I returned to the subject which had dominated my existence for the last six weeks. It was hard to believe that I, Daniel Rackham, a future mill owner, would have become so involved in something so complex and removed from the world of mills and mercantile inheritances. I should have stuck with Cynthia Goodson. She was eminently suited to my needs. She was lively, daring, and everything but the ordinary, lack-luster woman I would have expected her to be. In fact, I have no doubt that Cynthia would have suited me far better than Alicia would.

Looking out of the cab window, I observed the landmarks which indicated we were very close to the gallery. I put a lid on the issue of Alicia and Cynthia and prepared to open up another issue, that of Lister and his exhibition. I paid the cab driver and stood beholding the entrance of the building. It was an odd sort of building, a cross between a church and a public library. Its architecture seemed to be caught between a wish for preservation of the past and a need for modernity. The resultant picture was one of confused banality and not in the least ways appealing. I felt almost embarrassed for Lister; I'm sure he must have despised having his pictures viewed in such a tawdry affair as this. The appearance of the building quite convinced me
that Lister would not be present. Unless his attendance was absolutely necessary, he would remain unavailable in his studio for as long as possible.

The foyer of the gallery contained a concierge and a few loiterers, some of which appeared to be about to begin their visit. Others were giving opinions to each other on the paintings they had just witnessed and were evidently in the process of leaving. Collecting a catalog from the official at the entrance desk, I strode out into the first room of the gallery. According to my catalog, it contained mostly landscapes. The room contained about a dozen landscapes and a couple of terribly sentimental seascapes. Of what I saw, I liked little. I had, by way of trying to educate myself, developed a penchant for less, how shall we say, traditional art. Lister, while not a traditional person himself, had certainly allowed the demands of popular sentiment to dictate the style of his landscapes. They were popular but unartistic. They were like mass-produced furniture. Lister's skill was evident, but his spirit was not. I suspected that many of the paintings had already been sold; they were certainly of that quality which defines things as being marketable.

I worked my way from painting to painting until I reached the passageway which led from this room into the next. As I entered through the archway, I became aware of a number
of voices in the room I was entering. Turning the corner, I was confronted by a group of women who appeared to be surrounding a person who, as yet, I could not see. I drew nigh to the periphery of the group, hoping to discern the nature of its existence.

There in the center of this group of middle-aged, well-to-do females stood Acton Lister. He was attempting to describe a painting to which he was pointing. In their eagerness, the ladies had bunched up towards him and the painting behind him so that he scarcely had room to breathe. He was obviously finding the whole experience terribly trying and had, no doubt, only agreed to its taking place because he stood to gain from any sales which resulted. I found the whole thing rather amusing and couldn't help thinking that it served him right.

I stood listening to what was going on. Lister could not easily see me as I was largely hidden by an exceedingly voluminous creature who seemed to fill the space of two or three ordinary ladies. The strain of the business was quite evident on Lister's face and the imploring tone of voice he adopted in asking the ladies to move back a little.

"Ladies, please, we will all see better if we stand back a little. You will still be able to hear what I say, and the painting will undoubtably be more effective than if you all stand at arms-length from it."
"Yes, yes, Mr. Lister, but my eyesight is not as good as it might be," ventured one of the more elderly of the group.

"Very well, Miss Crompton, you may stay at the front. But the rest of you will only prejudice yourselves against the painting if you stand so close."

The painting in question was one I recognized. I had seen it a few weeks earlier in Lister's studio when it was only partially finished. Unfortunately, its completion had done little to improve it, but this obviously did not stop Lister from waxing eloquent on its qualities. The surrounding group of ladies appeared to share his enthusiasm although it was difficult to tell if they were excited about the painting or the chance to be in the company of a real painter.

At that moment Lister caught a glance of me and his face changed immediately.

"Ladies, I'm afraid that I shall have to leave you for a few moments. I have some important business to attend. Please continue to look around the exhibition; I shall return as soon as possible."

The ladies began to disperse, and Lister made his way towards me.

"Daniel, how utterly relieved I am that you have been sent to save me."
"I am only too glad I could have been of service."

He lowered his voice as if scared that the old ladies might hear him.

"You cannot know what absolute misery I've been through all in the name of art."

"I should have thought it was more likely to be for profit than art."

"Yes, you're probably right. Still, one must keep poverty at bay as long as possible."

"Still, it does seem a damnably unpleasant way to do it."

He nodded his head in agreement.

"I'm afraid I have very little choice but to abuse myself in this way. I'm definitely no better at anything else, so it looks as though I'm destined for this sort of thing."

He looked around, making sure none of his patrons were likely to be within striking range.

"So, Acton, how are things with you?"

"Well, apart from this miserable chore, I'm as well as can be expected."

I desperately wanted to ask of Alicia and was unfortunately unable to refrain from doing so.

"Have you seen Alicia recently?"

Lister paused before answering.

"Yes, actually I have, although I fear I shall not see
her for much longer."

"Why, is she leaving London?"

"No, but the painting is almost completed. One more sitting and it will be over. Soon my task will be complete. The question is what on earth is there left for me to do? The painting is by far my highest achievement. When it is done... well, I don't know what I shall do."

Lister's countenance had grown considerably more morbid so that by the time he had finished speaking his features had lost every evidence of vitality. His eyes were dark and empty, and his lips creased and pursed.

"I would have thought it was a good thing as the painting was causing you to suffer considerably. Now you will be free to resume your old life. I'm sure London's high society has been considerably less exciting since your involvement with Alicia."

"Well, I suppose I have neglected my shameful reputation to a certain extent. However, I scarcely feel in the mood for resuming it now."

Lister stared at me and was obviously aware of why I thought it would be beneficial to everyone should he finish the painting. I tried to explain.

"I just thought..."

"Of course you did, dear boy. You thought that as soon as I'd finished with Alicia, you could have what's left."
His voice turned bitter but not so much as mine was about to become.

"Acton, I fail to see why you should be so thoroughly rude, unless of course it's because you can't help yourself..."

"Hark at you..."

"Do not interrupt; I haven't finished yet. By the time you have finished your absurd painting, there will be nothing left of Alicia. Don't think it isn't known all over London how abominably you've treated that poor girl. Some say you encourage her to take morphine simply so she will be easy for you to control."

"How dare you make such an accusation!"

"I did not make it, Acton, I said others have. Anyway, that is not the point."

Lister looked at me with an imperious glint of derision in his eyes.

"Come, young philosopher and thinker, pray tell what the point is."

His mastery of me confused me for a second, but I soon regained control.

"The point is that you are a disgusting manipulator. You see everyone as objects to be played with until you grow tired of them. I suggest that instead of trying to ruin everyone else's lives, you devote yourself more exclusively to destroying your own."
By now my voice had risen in volume to be sufficiently loud to break the hush of the gallery. Fortunately, there were no visitors in the room during our fracas.

Lister's face grew redder, and I realized that any second now he would explode.

"I am sick and tired of hearing you whine about things you know nothing about. You are far too immature and ridiculous to know your own opinions, never mind judge what you consider the opinions of others to be. I suggest that you mind your own business and leave Alicia and myself to our business."

By now I'd realized that in order to be effective, I needed to rein in my own temper and at least appear calm and collected if I was to stand any chance with Lister at all.

"Alicia was right about you, Acton. You're quite beyond help. You have revealed yourself as a totally unreasonable individual with not an ounce of humanity in you. I am afraid, that, like Alicia, I will have to regard you as a lost cause. You are too far gone to even recognize your own sickness. The sooner you finish your painting, the better then Alicia, if there is anything left of her, and I can leave you to your obsessions for good."

My speech had given Lister time to restrain himself as well, and when he spoke he was more like the Lister I was used to. He hit the nerve which hurt most.

"Daniel, I feel almost sorry for you. You are obviously
totally misguided about Alicia. The poor girl will never be yours, and the sooner you accept it, the more reasonable you'll be. Let's face it, you'd be far better off marrying some mill owner's daughter. Alicia is far too much of a woman for you, I can assure you. No, the problem is, Daniel, that you have gone beyond what you are capable of. You're an average kind of person who, for God knows what reason, has developed delusions of grandeur. It is quite apparent to all of us that you are not man enough for the job, so I suggest you go home to your lodgings and read a book on mill management or something you are capable of."

Lister smiled as if there couldn't possibly be a rebuttal available to a dimwit such as myself.

"I shall take your advice and leave. It is quite obvious that our little chat has been altogether too much for you. I can see that the strain of things is getting on top of you, so I won't push you any further lest it makes you fall over the edge. However, I will say one last thing..."

"Oh, please do. Share your wonderful words of wisdom."

"My advice to you is to give up painting and concentrate on doing what you do best. Being insolent and ill-mannered at dinner parties is about the limit of your potential. I fear that all else, as this exhibition demonstrates, is quite beyond you."

Before Lister could answer with another volley of
sarcastic vitriole, I bade him goodbye as cordially as possible and beat a hasty retreat. My successful departure was aided by the timely return of a number of the ladies Lister had been entertaining when I arrived. I pondered on how amusing it would be to watch Lister continue his discussion of the painting after what had just transpired.

As I reached the entrance hall of the gallery, my heartbeat began to subside to more manageable proportions. By the time I had vacated the building and was once again in the bright, white light of early afternoon, my state of excitement diminished enough for me to think about what had just happened. The impact of the meeting crept upon me as I walked down the street, oblivious to all else. What had happened between us undoubtedly marked the death knell of our relationship. There could be no going back after what had taken place. We had not simply argued or quarrelled as independantminded friends often do. We had gone for each other's jugular vein. One cannot go back and say "Oh, I'm sorry. It was all my fault." It is rather too late for that sort of thing once one's words have mortally wounded the opponent.

My dazed condition rapidly turned into one of abject misery as I reflected on the unnecessary way I had behaved. I did not believe that Lister was undeserving of my words, but somehow that was little consolation to me. Lister was one
less person I could commune with. His attempts to educate had ended in a fight to the death between teacher and pupil. And what of Alicia? How had I effected her existence by my visit to the gallery? Certainly I had done nothing to help her position; if anything, I had aggravated it. Lister's precarious mental condition was obviously not improved by my attack, and I am sure that Alicia would be the one to feel the results of any deterioration in Lister's state of mind.

The further I walked, the more I realized the harm I had done in that brief visit to Lister's exhibition. It was without doubt an irredeemable disaster. To apologize to Lister was beyond my powers of altruism. As far as I was concerned, he was the wrongdoer; it was just a pity that I confronted him with my opinions in quite the way I did. If Alicia had been there, she would have ran from us both. It was just the kind of thing she believed was inevitable. To her, we would have simply been acting out the final scenes of the tragedy she had prophesied all along.

During my prognosis of the events that had just occurred, I was also eager to find a cab. The thought of remaining outside any longer left me with an unbearable feeling of insecurity. I wanted to be home as quickly as possible, cosseted away from the unpleasantness of the world. Across the street I spied a line where cabs wait. I ran, looking
neither right nor left, towards the row of waiting cabs. Horses broke step and drivers swore as I narrowly avoided death under the hooves and wheels of the traffic. With death-defying luck rather than good judgment, I reached the opposite side of the road and was able to procure a stationary version of one of the wretched contraptions which had narrowly avoided killing me. My reckless dive across the road had been watched by a number of the unoccupied cab drivers, including the one whose cab I was about to enter.

"Eh, guv'nor, you wanna be careful. You nearly came a cropper. You was nearly run down."

"Yes, I realize that, but I am in quite a hurry, so if you could manage to make haste then my recklessness will not have been entirely in vain."

"Well, it's like I says to my misses, 'less haste more speed.'"

Before I could answer this fine proverb, the cab lurched into motion and I banged my head against the wooden board behind the seat. The driver had certainly taken me at my word. We sped along at a pace which I cannot remember ever matching let alone exceeding. Other moving objects passed with the same blurr as one normally associates with stationary things. After a number of narrow escapes from the jaws of catastrophe, the cab came to a screeching halt beside my lodgings. It could have been my imagination, but I
thought I saw the curtains moving in windows as curious neighbors were attracted by my sudden arrival. Perhaps this would be a sudden enough arrival to shock even Hardcastle. I leapt forth from the cab and paid the driver, rewarding him more than I normally would for his sterling efforts. Hardcastle was nowhere to be found. My efforts had been in vain. I slunk off into the study, fearing that I had lost my one and only chance. The excitement of my dramatic arrival subsided, and I was left with the empty feeling which always follows excessive behavior. I sat, glumly returning to the subject of Lister. Whichever way I acted, it always seemed to be the least successful. I did despise the fellow, but largely, I fear, because he made me react so badly. It always seems to be the case that the very things that attract a person to one's being are in the end the very same things that seem most repugnant about that person. What gives us pleasure in the beginning produces pain in the end. This was undoubtably my attitude towards Lister. I was originally drawn to him by his careful attention to decadence and hedonism. Now I found him disagreeable for the very same quality. It was I, not he, who had changed. When confronted with his character, having had to bear the brunt of it, I found it less appealing than it seemed to be when I saw others as its victim. And what of Alicia? The same cannot be said of her. I had not
changed my opinion of her; it had simply become more intense. Nothing about Alicia could ever be objectionable; she was perfect.

I had inadvertently reminded myself of Alicia. To do so was a mistake as it meant I would concentrate on her image forever or at least until I wore myself out. It is a disadvantage to dwell on something which one is powerless to influence. The reality of the situation was quite clear. I was totally powerless to change what was to be.

The fire was unlit as the weather was rather mild. I sat looking into the empty grate, searching my brain for a way out of the dilemma I faced. Alicia was attainable; I was fairly sure of that. The problem was that I could not, even though everything depended on it, think of a single strategy for realizing my goal. It was quite apparent that love was not a significant factor in the situation. I had always imagined that love was everything in the success or failure of an affair. In this affair, it was almost irrelevant, and its presence was certainly no advantage. I had realized the age of romance was on its death bed, but as far as my circumstances were concerned, it may as well be already dead.

This process of silent discussion went on for some time. The longer it continued, the greater became my confusion. Finally I was reduced to the kind of addled state which is
usually associated with bedlam. I sat confused, barely conscious of my own existence. Time drifted by as it seems to do during sleep. My eyes remained open, but my mind was closed to rational thought.

Hours passed by with me in this state. I would have sat there forever had I not been forcibly returned to earth by the entrance of Hardcastle. All thoughts of my earlier would-be surprise had vanished from my mind. I greeted him as though he were a stranger.

"Good evening, sir. I trust you have had a pleasant day?"

His voice shattered the undulating unvoiced sounds of my mind.

"Sorry, I didn't catch what you said."

"I was enquiring as to your day, sir."

"Oh, yes, you were. Well, it was like a typical English summer's day. It started off clear and bright, but as the day went on, the clouds rolled in and by the afternoon, the day had deteriorated into a heavy, thundery kind of affair. In short, it did not live up to my expectations."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir."

"Well, I suppose I should have expected as much, really. I don't really feel like eating this evening, so you need not bother preparing anything."

"I will say goodnight then, sir."
I returned his adieu and returned to the contemplations which he had interrupted with his entrance. I should have felt hungry, having eaten nothing since early in the morning. As it was, I had no appetite for anything at all.

I had reached a deadlock with Lister and Alicia. No escape seemed possible. I would never be able to visit Lister's studio again, that was for sure. As far as Alicia was concerned, it was she who needed to make the next move. I had pushed her too far already without producing any of the desired effects. It was pointless to go on badgering her. I would sit and wait, even if it was the last thing I ever did. Sitting and waiting was easy enough in the state I found myself in this evening. I might not find it quite as easy to do the next day or the one after that.

Sitting in this miasmic state, I remained unaware of anything outside myself until I heard the clock in the nearby church strike ten. By the time ten chimes had shattered the silence, I had risen and was heading for bed. No point in continuing to remain awake, I pondered. Sleep would be an eminently superior choice to sitting and brooding all night. Sleep removes one sufficiently from problems so as to make them only remembered in the mixed-up muddle of one's dreams.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Over a week had past since the business with Lister at the gallery. Most of that time I had spent in aimless preoccupation. The increase in my monthly allowance had allowed me to dissipate some of the time in making rash, unnecessary purchases and spending money at an alarming rate. I bought cigars which cost twice as much as the ones I normally smoked. I smoked them at such a rate that those who didn't know me might have supposed I had inherited a tobacco plantation. I had finally purchased a hat at the establishment of Hawkins and Jones. It cost a small fortune, but what did I care? It was, according to the standard of success I used (the amount of time wasted), a most profitable outing. The whole trip wasted nearly four hours which was money well-spent in anyone's book.

That week of inactivity had given me the chance to read those books which one feels one ought to read but hasn't the time or the interest to do under normal circumstances. Worthy but dull tomes are easy to put aside when one has the excuse
of other occupation. I had no other occupation and submitted to the notion that told me I would remain ignorant if I didn't read some of these highly regarded works. Involving oneself in something that isn't interesting has its rewards. By the end of the week, I felt a sense of satisfaction pervading my existence. I had actually achieved something. Now I could say I had read the likes of Gibbon and Malthus and lived to tell the tale.

After a week of heroic spending and reading, I had finally had enough of both. It was therefore both a joy and a surprise to have Hardcastle enter the study early Sunday morning and announce that Mr. Edward Norton was here to see me. My excitement got the better of me.

"Well, Hardcastle, don't just stand there. Send him in."

Hardcastle looked at me as if to say "I was just going to."

Edward came lumbering in, his great handsome form filling the doorway entirely.

"Edward, how simply marvelous to see you. How have you been keeping?"

I asked the question thinking that he looked rather wan.

"It's good to see you, Daniel, although it is a pity we must meet under these circumstances."

His face grew strained as he spoke.

"What circumstances? What are you talking about?"
"You mean you have not heard?"
"Heard what, for God's sake?"
Edward clasped his hands tightly and looked down at the floor.
"It's about Acton Lister and Alicia. I felt sure you would have heard. Perhaps you had better sit down."
I did as he suggested and a lump began to develop in my throat.
"You don't mean they're married or something, do you?"
"No, Daniel, I'm afraid it's worse than that."
"Oh, my..." The rest of the sounds refused to leave my lips.
"I'm sorry, Daniel, but they're both dead."
Edward's words struck me with the force of a speeding train.
"No, they can't be! Not both of them, surely. What are you saying?"
"Alicia and Acton are dead."
I sat in silence, my body quivering as its fibers fought to grasp what Edward had said.
"What happened?"
"Well, I don't know all the details, but I believe it happened yesterday during the final sitting for the painting. Apparently when Lister had finished the painting, there was an argument. The butler said he heard raised voices and a
good deal of banging around. Then he heard the sound of a
gun being fired. He rushed upstairs and opened the studio
door. Alicia was lying dead on the divan and Lister stood
over her with the gun pointed at his head. Before the
butler could say a word, Lister pulled the trigger and killed
himself."

"Oh, no, Edward, it can't be true! Please tell me Alicia
is not dead!"

"I'm afraid she is. The doctors say she died instantly.
She suffered no pain."

Edward's voice exploded all around me. It sounded like
it was coming from everywhere.

"Why, why did it happen?"

Edward began to explain his opinions, but I did not hear
a word he said. My senses were blocked to all else but the
image of Alicia's face.

Edward stayed with me a while longer; but eventually I
persuaded him to leave me alone. I sat contemplating the
idea that Alicia was gone, that I would never see her again.
My mind turned around and around as it attempted to look at
what I'd learned from a view which was less terrible, less
tragic. If only I'd behaved more reasonably when I met
Lister. The panorama of alternatives filled my vision, but
the single truth drove them all away. Alicia was dead; this
was reality. I was alone; the others had gone, and I was
alone in the whole universe. A terrible pain shot through my remorse as I realized that they had left me. They were together; they had left without me. The separation was unbearable.

Outside, high, billowing clouds skudded along the bright morning sky. Birds hopped between the branches of flowering cherry blossoms, darting in and out of the pink splashes of color. A group of children played hop-scotch on the chalked pavement outside my window. Soon Hardcastle would enter and ask if I required lunch. One could always rely on Hardcastle.