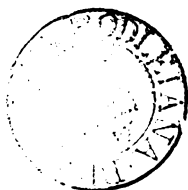


FRASER'S MAGAZINE

NEW SERIES. VOL. XXI.

FROM JANUARY to JUNE 1880



LONDON
LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.
PATERNOSTER ROW
1880

EARTHBOUND.

A STORY OF THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN.

By MRS. OLIPHANT.

CHAPTER I.

THERE was but a small party for Christmas at Daintrey. The family were in mourning, which meant more than it usually means, and the whole life of the place was subdued. Nevertheless, the brothers and sisters were young, and were beginning to rise above the impression of the grief which had come upon them. The gloom had lightened a little; they began to forget the details of death, and regard the image of their brother in an aspect more familiar. It was not long since the news had come, and yet already this change had taken place, as was inevitable. The father and mother were less easily cheered; but life must go on even though death interrupts. The girls and boys could not be made to sit like mutes around a grave. They had to rise up again, and go on with their individual existence. Lady Beresford, who was a wise mother, felt and acknowledged this, though her heart was still bleeding. Christmas was coming; and though there could be no Christmas festivities in the ordinary sense of the word, one or two old friends and connections were invited. Sir Robert, for his part, was opposed to the appearance of strangers. He was never very fond of visitors. 'What do you want with people here?' he said, with a kind of growl, in which he disguised his grief. 'Surely once in a way the girls might get through Christmas without visitors. Christmas! the very idea of these horrible merry Christmases that we shall have to go through makes me ill!

'I should do without them only too gladly, Robert: but the girls and the boys are too young to be cooped up. Grief is so monotonous, and they are so young. It is not that they love *him* the less; but they must live—for that matter, we must all go on living,' she said, keeping with an effort the tears in her eyes. A mother who cannot give herself over to her sorrow, who must work through all her little daily round of duties all the same, and think of the girls' bonnets, and the boots and flannels of the boys at school, and only now and then in a spare moment can shut her door or turn her face to the wall and weep a little over her dead, the tears that have been gathering slowly while she has smiled and talked and kept everything going through the long day—has a hard task when her troubles come; but Lady Beresford bore her burden as sweetly as a woman could, holding up as long as was possible, then stopping to have her cry out, and rising and going on again. Sir Robert became morose with his grief; but she had no time for self-indulgence. And naturally

she had her way, and the few were invited whom it had seemed to her good to invite. One of them was Edmund Coventry, who had been a ward of Sir Robert, and now in his manhood calculated upon being a member of the Daintrey party at all those periods which are specially dedicated to home. He was a young man of excellent character and very fair fortune; and, if the truth must be told, the heads of the house at Daintrey had concluded that he would be a very convenient match for Maud, who was the second girl. Perhaps it would be better to say that one of the heads of the house had already perceived and accepted this view. A matchmaking mother is a thing that is supposed on English soil to be extremely objectionable; and yet if she does not think of the welfare of her girls, who is to do it? The French mother considers it her first duty. Lady Beresford was a high-minded Englishwoman, and not a scheming mamma; but she could not shut her eyes to the fact that Edmund Coventry was exactly suited to Maud. And so, among the few who came to spend a very quiet Christmas at Daintrey, and 'cheer a sad house,' which was what she said in her invitations, Edmund was one of the first of whom she thought.

'Poor boy!' she said, 'he has always come here. He has no other place where he will care to go. Of course he will know that it will not be lively. But he is a good boy. I do not think he will mind.'

'I am sure, mamma, he will not mind,' said Susan, who was the eldest. Susan was going to make a by no means brilliant marriage. She was to marry a young man who was in the diplomatic service, but had no money, and was scarcely the sort of man to be a diplomat; so that the prizes of that profession seemed improbable to him. And she thought it very desirable that Maud and Edmund Coventry should see a good deal of each other. 'He will be glad to be with us in our trouble,' she said; 'he was always fond of Willie.' Thus the invitation was given half in love and tender certainty of sympathy, yet half with a certain calculation too.

The other guests were of a very quiet kind—a brother of Sir Robert's, a lonely bachelor; a widowed sister of Lady Beresford's with her little boy and girl; the former clergyman of the parish, who had been Willie's tutor once upon a time; a nephew who was an orphan, and had no home to spend his Christmas in; and Edmund. 'He will be the only little bit of liveliness. He will help to cheer us up,' Susan said. Her attaché was to come too, but only for a few days. He was one of those to whom social duties were important, and he had a great many visits to pay. But for this mourning they would have been married before now.

Edmund Coventry was a young man who was very well off, and very greatly esteemed. He was twenty-seven—no longer a boy. He had a very nice estate, and a house in town, and no relations to speak of. He was very well-looking, without being handsome, which is perhaps the sort of compromise with nature which is most approved

in England. There are a great many people who do not care for unusually handsome men. Beauty is an extravagance, they feel, in the male portion of the world. But Edmund's good looks did not go the length of beauty. He was not a tall, muscular, well-developed hero, but slight, and not more than of middle stature. With all he was an ingratiating, lovable young man, very gentle in manners, very tender in his friendships; no doubt he would make an excellent husband. There was no need to explain to him the position of affairs in the house. He knew all about it, and he sympathised with them in every point. 'Mamma hesitated to ask you,' said Maud, 'because we were to be so quiet.' 'Could I wish to be anything but quiet?' he said, with a tender half-reproach. 'Do you think, after all the happy times here, that I have no feeling.' But, indeed, no one had thought that, as Maud made haste to say.

The carols were sung, but with tears in them. The house was dressed as usual with holly and all the decorations of the time; and there was at least a great deal of conversation which lengthened the gloom and silence of the previous period. Even Sir Robert was glad to talk to Mr. Lightfoot, who had been the rector in former times. On Christmas night the attempt at games was somewhat doleful as it will be, alas! this Christmas in many a sorrowing and many an anxious house; but the talk and the little bustle of renewed movement did everybody good. The commonplace ghost-stories which are among the ordinary foolishnesses of Christmas did not suit with the more serious tone in which their thoughts flowed; but there was some talk among the older people about those sensations and sentiments that seem sometimes to convey a kind of prophecy, only understood after the event, of sorrow on the way; and the young ones amused themselves after a sort with discussions of those new-fangled fancies which have replaced that old favourite lore. They talked about what is called spiritualism, and of many things, both in that fantastic faith and in the older ghostly traditions, which we are all half glad to think cannot be explained. The older people, indeed, unhesitatingly rejected all mediums and supernatural operators of every kind as impostors; but even on this point various members of the party had things to tell which they did not know how to explain. 'Is not there some tradition of a ghost about Daintrey?' Mr. Lightfoot, the old rector, said, as they all sat in a wide circle round the great glowing fire just before the moment should arrive for bed-candles and general good-nights. There was not very much light in the room, but, large as it was, it was all ruddy and brilliant with the blaze of the great cheerful fire.

'Nothing of the sort,' said Sir Robert emphatically. It was he who was most strong as to the whole thing being an imposition, and who 'did not believe a word' of the stories he was told.

'I believe there is something—very vague,' said Lady Beresford. But there was a meaning look exchanged between them, and the talk suddenly came to an end.

And by and by the ladies went all flocking out of the room, carrying their lights, like a procession of the wise virgins in the parable. But their black dresses made that procession a sad one, though the soft bloom of the young faces came out with even more effect when the light found nothing else to dwell upon. The young men found a little relief from the gravity of the conversation in the smoking-room, where Mr. Beresford the elder, the uncle of the party, discoursed upon town and its charms, and congratulated himself that he was not like his brother Robert, the head of the family, and compelled to pass his winters in the middle of those damp acres of park. 'It would kill me in a year,' Mr. Beresford said. On the whole they were all glad that the worst was over, and Christmas got safely done with for that year.

CHAPTER II.

EDMUND showed no inclination to cut his visit short; he stayed on after Uncle Reginald had returned to his dear club and his rooms in St. James's Street, and the attaché had gone on upon his round of visits, and young Beresford, the cousin, had returned to his work. The eldest of the sons at home was over twenty; the other two were boys at school. And Susan and Maud and little Edie were the girls. It could not be a very sad house, after all, with all that youth in it; and on the whole Daintrey began to turn round as it were, like the earth when a new day is breaking, turning itself to meet the light. Edmund was very much at home and very comfortable, and he was pleased to think that he was doing them good, as Lady Beresford told him with a smile of tender gratitude. It had not yet occurred to him that of all people in the world Maud was the one who would suit him most exactly for a wife. But he was in a very promising way for making that discovery, which had already faintly gleamed upon the consciousness of Maud herself as neither unlikely nor unpleasant. They saw a great deal of each other, though not a bit too much. They were like brother and sister, Lady Beresford said; which was quite true: and yet there was always a possibility of something more.

Daintrey was a handsome house of no particular period, built almost due east and west like a church. The front entrance was by a square court shut in by a screen-wall built between the two wings. At the back the wings were very shallow projecting but slightly from the *corps de logis*. On the south side of the house was a green terrace, as high as the windows of the sitting-rooms, ascended by handsome marble steps ornamented with vases as in an Italian garden and separated by the brilliant parterres of the flower-garden from the house. Running along the upper end of the garden and connecting it with the west end of the house was the lime-tree walk, a noble bit of avenue at right angles with the terrace. Both of these were beautiful—but the little square corner which connected them was not beautiful. Here, for no apparent reason at all, a wall had been built, of the date of some hundred years back, a high brick wall, quite out

of place, screening in a square and rather gloomy angle of grass, in the midst of which stood a high pedestal surmounted by a large stone vase. Whether this was meant to commemorate anything, or whether it was merely supposed to be ornamental, in the days of George III. nobody could tell; but that it was very funereal and ugly was certain. In the side of this wall farthest from the house was a door which opened into the byway through the park. Perhaps the wall had been built to stop some right of way; perhaps—but there is little use in multiplying peradventures. There stood the wall built to shut out no one knew what; there loomed aloft the funeral urn upon its pedestal raised to commemorate no one knew what. Sometimes the door would be locked by a sulky gardener, and the key had to be hunted for in the house and out of it, high and low. At such moments Sir Robert, especially if he had himself to wait, would vow that he would throw down the wall and abolish both urn and door. But Sir Robert was an absolute Tory in action, though something of a Liberal in politics; and threatened walls live long, especially when there is no reason why they should live.

Edmund had gone out with the intention of walking to the village one of these wintry afternoons. There had been talk of skating, but the ice was not quite solid enough for skating, and his errands to the village were manifold. He were going to see about Maud's skates, which wanted something done to them. He was going to the Rectory to tell the new rector, who was young and a great athlete, to join the party at the pond to-morrow if the frost 'held'; and he had other little commissions to do. When there is nothing better to be done it is something for a man to have commissions in the village—it gives him a reason for his walk; it makes him feel that he is not absolutely without an occupation. The boys were all about the pond, helping it to freeze, as the keeper said—watching, at least, with the most anxious eyes, how this process went on. Edmund came out at the western door of the house facing a low red sun, which shone into his eyes, casting long level gleams of light across the grass and dying it orange. He was very lighthearted to-day, with a feeling that poor Willie Beresford had died long ago, and that life had begun again, and that the prospects of existence were opening out. Perhaps it was Maud, whose sweetness and pleasant society had suggested to him long stretches of happy life to come. He went out, glad even of the sharpness of the air, pleased to hear the crackling under his feet which betokened the frost, and admiring the fairy whiteness in which the great trees had robed themselves. All lit up with those red rays, with warm and gorgeous belts of colour upon the sky, and every prospect of cold and fine weather, the things most desirable when there is a frost and it is Christmas, the prospect round him was of itself exhilarating. How foolish, he thought, of the girls not to come out, to get the benefit of the smart walk through the park, and the keen fresh air which made his countenance glow. Talk of summer! The park at Daintrey was lovely

always, but it never was more beautiful than it was now, with that red sunshine lighting up all those stately white giants in their robes of rime. He started lightly, closing the door after him with a cheerful bang, and turning his steps towards the lime-tree walk, through which one great beam of sunshine like red gold had pierced in the opening between the two greatest trees. This looked like a golden bridge cutting the little avenue in two; beyond it there was the shadow of the wall already described which thrust itself straight in front of the low sun.

While Edmund admired this great broad blaze of light he was startled by seeing something move beyond it in the darker part—something white, which he could not make out so long as he was himself in the sun. But when he had crossed that bridge of light he was still more surprised to see in front of him, at the end of the avenue, a woman, a lady, walking along with the most composed and gentle tread. The road was not exactly a private road—all the people from the village, almost everybody who came to Daintrey on foot, used it. But Edmund thought he knew all the people about, and he certainly did not know anyone whose appearance was at all like that of the lady who preceded him to the door in the wall—unless it were one of the girls masquerading; but he had just left the girls with their mother round the fire, and he could not entertain this idea. The dress, too, struck him with great surprise. It was a white dress, with a black mantle round the shoulders, and a large hat: not unlike the kind of costume which people in æsthetic circles begin to affect, but far more real and natural, it seemed to him—though how he could judge at this distance and with only the lady's back visible it would be difficult to tell. The curious thing was that the moment Edmund saw this pretty figure in front of him his heart began to beat. He had the same feeling which a man sometimes has when he suddenly meets a lovely face and says to himself that, please God, this woman is the one woman for him. But such a thing would be absurd when you consider that it was only her back he saw. Yet it made his heart beat; he was seized with a great desire to follow, to 'get a good look' at her, to know what she could be doing here and who she was. What had she been doing there? Surely a creature of so much grace, moving like that, dressed like that, could not possibly have been visiting the servants' hall; and that she had not been in the drawing-room he was sure. If she only would turn round at the sound of his step:—but she did not turn round. She moved on as if she heard nothing—across the curious little square, straight to the door in the wall. Come, Edmund said to himself, if she is going to the village I must overtake her. And he did not hurry, feeling sure she could not escape him. He was pleased by the little mystery—Who could it be? But he must find out before he returned, for unknown ladies do not walk about in a park in the country, or go to and fro between the village and the great house, without being easily traceable. What

a pretty walk she had! so light that her step was not audible—no creaking and crunching upon fallen twigs and stones and frostbound sod as with him. He was charmed with the pretty graceful figure—certainly a little like Maud, slimmer and not quite so straight, with a pretty droop in it of fragility and dependence, but yet certainly like—*younger perhaps*, though Maud was but nineteen. He followed her softly, promising to himself to quicken his steps as soon as she should have passed the door in the wall to which she was leading the way. Presently, about two minutes before him, she reached the door; he was so near that he could see her half turn round as if to look who was behind: but, though she must have perceived him, she closed the door upon him as she passed through—not very civil, he thought; but perhaps she was *espègle*, and could not resist a little merry affront to him, innocently provocative, as is the fashion of girls. He hurried along the few intervening steps of the way, and opened the door. Perhaps after all she knew him; perhaps it *was* Maud, who was very fond of fun in the old days. The smile was almost a laugh on his mouth when he stepped out of the park and let the door swing carelessly behind him—not shutting it elaborately, as she had taken the trouble to do.

Strange, very strange! There was nobody to be seen on the other side of the door; certainly it must be Maud or one of the girls. She had slipped behind a bush, no doubt, to bewilder him. There were several byways running in different directions—one towards the deserted cricket-ground, another towards the keeper's cottage, beside the straight road which led to the village. Probably she had tucked up her dress and made a dart among the brushwood out of sight. He stood for a moment looking after her, now one way, now another, but he could see no one. 'I know you,' he cried, 'I know you; where are you, Maud?' But there was no answer from among the brushwood. Finally, he had to make up his mind that he trick had been successful, that she had got away, and that if he was to execute his commissions in the village he must not lose any time. But he went along with only half the spirit with which he had started, his mind quite absorbed in this adventure. As he resumed his way he met one of the keepers coming in the opposite direction, whom he stopped to ask if he had met a lady on his way. The man looked at him as if he thought him mad, but answered No, he had met no one. 'A lady in a white dress and a black mantle,' said Edmund. 'Lord bless you, sir,' said the keeper, 'a white dress!'—and then it occurred to Edmund for the first time how entirely inappropriate such a garb was to the season. It must have been one of the girls who had 'dressed up,' as they used to be so fond of doing in the old days, to give him a fright. And yet in his heart he did not in the least believe this explanation he had given to himself. Even Maud, though he liked her so much, had never excited that sudden and causeless emotion in his heart. It was someone new—someone who had never crossed his path before, and who was destined to

work he knew not what commotion in it. But then, who could it be?

‘Did you go out after I went out?’ he asked when he went back to Daintrey. ‘Tell me, did you or anyone take a run into the park?’

‘Oh, no; mother would not let us go. She said we could not go to skate to-morrow if we went out so late to-day.’

‘Or has anyone been here? Did you have any visitors?’ Edmund asked, though he knew very well that this could not explain the presence of the lady who must have left the house before he did. Maud looked up at him with her soft blue eyes.

‘We have had no one,’ she said. ‘We did not stir all the afternoon. Mother had a headache, and we did not wish to leave her. After you went out we sat and talked till the dressing-bell rang. That was all; but why do you suppose we must have had visitors?’ Edmund felt—he could scarcely tell why—a little shyness and unwillingness to explain himself.

‘Because I met a lady in the park,’ he said, ‘and could not make out who she was. Have you any new neighbours since I have been gone?’

Maud shook her head. ‘Nobody,’ she said. Nobody had been calling. Nobody had intruded into the neighbourhood. She looked earnestly at the young man, who, for his part, was a little excited by his own questions, but not at all unpleasantly excited.

‘I thought for a moment you were playing me a trick. She looked a little like you—that is, her figure looked like you. I did not see her face.’

‘Like me?’ Maud was half pleased, but more surprised. ‘I play you a trick? I don’t think,’ she said, with a sad look, ‘that I shall ever do that again.’

‘But I hope you will a hundred times,’ said the young man; and this pleased her, though she could not have told why. ‘But help me to find out who it is,’ he went on. ‘I feel annoyed that I don’t know everybody, as I used to do. She was dressed in white with a ——’

‘In white! You must have been dreaming,’ said Maud, in amazement.

He stopped short again. ‘That’s why I thought it must be you,’ he said, yet with a little conscious jesuitry, for he had not thought so—indeed, had assured himself that the little stir of his being which he had experienced could only mean that this was some one of a different kind from any he had met before: a new woman, a creature born to influence him. ‘But it is quite true, and I was not dreaming. She had on a white gown. Something black over her shoulders like, the thing ladies have been wearing lately: I forget how you call it—not a cloak nor a scarf—something put round and knotted behind like this,’ said Edmund, doing his best to show how, upon himself with his hands.

‘A fichu, you mean,’ said Maud, suffering herself to be betrayed into a smile.

‘A fichu, that’s the thing; and a large broad hat. But she did not look like art-needlework—she looked quite natural.’

‘What an interest you must have taken in this lady! When did you meet her? It could not have been anyone coming here, for no one has been here all day.’

‘I met her—but I did not meet her—I followed her along the lime-tree walk and out by the little corner door.’

‘How very strange! I cannot think who it can have been. And where did she go after?’

‘That is the strangest of all,’ said Edmund. ‘She disappeared somewhere. That was another reason why I thought it must have been you. I cannot tell where she went. Down by the keeper’s cottage, I suppose; but I saw her no more.’

‘I’ll tell you who it was,’ said Maud, just a little piqued—‘it must have been the keeper’s niece, who has come for a little change. She is in a dressmaker’s in London. Of course she will dress nicely—though to wear *white* on a winter afternoon, trailing across the damp grass ——’ She laughed again but not so sweetly as before. ‘This must have been your lady, Edmund, I fear.’

‘I do not believe it. I cannot believe it,’ he said, much vexed; but after a good deal of resistance he was brought to allow that as he had only seen her back, and that at a little distance, he could not have any such certainty as he had supposed that she was a lady.

‘Besides,’ said Maud, with a little gentle triumph, ‘a girl like that may walk like a lady and dress like a lady. She has got to be among ladies most of her time, and to see the best people. Unless you talked to her and found she dropped her h’s, or had vulgar ideas, how could you tell? Indeed, sometimes they talk even, just as nicely as we do,’ said the young lady, more just than many of her kind. This seemed to make an end of the question. At least Edmund could find no more to say; and Lady Beresford, who had observed the long and interesting conversation in which he had been engaged with Maud, gave him a still kinder smile than usual when she bade him good night.

CHAPTER III.

NEXT day the frost held; the pond was bearing, and the whole house turned out to skate—even Sir Robert. Lady Beresford looked on with that indulgent wonder with which a woman regards a man’s delight in outdoor amusements, and the charm they exercise over him. She was unfeignedly glad that her husband should be roused from that growling seclusion in the library, which looked like temper and meant grief—glad to the bottom of her heart; and yet there was a wondering in her mind, a sensation of half-grieved, half-smiling surprise. She was glad to get them all out of the house, and said ‘Thank God!’ fervently, that here was something which would take off the strain, which would bring in a little amusement, and help the convalescence of grief which was working itself so quickly

in these young people; and then she went up to her own room and shut her door, feeling as if she, who had the best right to it, had got that faithful sorrow all to herself, and uncovered his picture, and read his last letter, and wept out all the tears that had been gathering and gathering. Meanwhile, the rest had got out of the shadow for the moment, and the pond was a merry scene. Sir Robert skated about very solemnly at first, taking long turns round the island that lay at one end of the long piece of water; but by and by he began to help little Edie and give directions to Tom. This diversion filled up the whole day and the next. Edmund had been half vexed, half irritated by the supposed discovery that his white lady was the keeper's niece, especially as Maud had already given him several little playful reminders and he determined, accordingly, that he would not allow himself to think any more of the little figure which had so charmed him. Of course it was mere imagination, nothing else—a girl's back, in a black fichu and white gown. What could anyone make of that? There was in his mind a lurking purpose of coming home from the ice some evening by the keeper's cottage, just to see; but even that he did not carry out for those two days. On the third afternoon, however, by some chance, he was left to come home alone. The others had set out before he was ready. He heard their voices sounding cheerily through the frosty night air, a good way on, upon the path before him, when he completed his last long whirl round the island, during which Sir Robert had got impatient, and summoned all his flock about him. They had all lingered to the last moment possible, as there were signs of the frost breaking. It was dark, so dark that Edmund could scarcely see to take his skates off, and all the hollows of the park were full of mist, and the sky overspread and blurred, and covered with clouds. It was clearer in the east, however, and there an early pale-eyed young moon, with a certain eagerness about her, as though full of impatience to see what was going on in the earth, had got up hastily in a bit of blue. She touched the mists, and made them poetical, gradually lightening over the milky expanse of the park, in which the trees stood up like bands of shadows.

Suddenly it came into Edmund's head that this was the very moment to carry out his intention. He took up his skates hastily, and walked round by the other end of the pond towards the cottage of Ferney the keeper. The moon, getting brighter every moment, threw the whole little settlement of this small habitation in the midst of the park and woods, into brilliant relief. There was a sound of dogs and human voices populating the stillness, and the cluster of low red roofs, the smoke from the chimneys, the cheerful blaze of firelight out of the uncovered windows, seemed to cheer and warm the whole landscape. Half ashamed of his own artifice, Edmund stopped at the door to give some message to the keeper. In the room beyond he saw a young woman seated at a table sewing, the light of a candle throwing a full light upon her. She was dressed in black, with the usual white

collar and little locket—a handsome, pale girl; and as Edmund stared in, forgetful of politeness in his curiosity, she got up, with a reserve that was in itself coquettish, and walked to the other end of the room. When he saw this movement he had almost laughed aloud. That the lady of the lime-walk! They might as well have told him that good Mrs. Ferney, with her stout, matronly bulk, and white apron, was the lady he had met. He went off, pleased with his own discrimination, pleased that he had not been mistaken, wondering if he should ever meet her again anywhere. He felt sure that he would know her, wherever he might see her, by her figure and by her walk.

He asked the keeper some trivial question to justify his pause at the house, then walked on, whistling, with cheerful speed, till he came to the little corner door, as it was called; but he had scarcely got within, when he checked himself abruptly. The moon was shining full across the green terrace and the empty beds of the flower-garden, streaming upon this little forlorn angle and its big ugly urn. Full in its light, softly crossing in front of the big pedestal, her pretty figure relieved against it, within half a dozen paces of him, coming towards him, was the lady he had seen before. Her dress was the same, dead white, with the black fichu, all frills and fringe, tied behind; a broad hat, thrown back a little from her face. His heart gave a great jump when he saw that in a moment he must pass close, and that she could not in any way conceal herself from him. He almost stopped short, but she came on softly without embarrassment, without alarm. Certainly she was like Maud: a tender little pensive face, with soft, very large eyes—which must be blue, Edmund felt—a pensive half-smile about the mouth. She was neither startled by the sight of him nor did she take a single step out of his way, but went on at the same composed pace. She had almost passed him, when he bethought himself to pull off his hat. This seemed to give her a little movement of surprise. She half turned her head to look at him, and the half-smile on her delicate lips brightened a little. It was too slight, too evanescent, to be called pleasure; and yet it was something like pleasure that lighted up the gentle face. Then she passed on, and in another moment had gone out by the door. He had not opened it for her, as politeness required. He had been too much taken by surprise—bewildered by the sudden appearance. Even now he stood still, dazed, not knowing what to do, puzzled how to address a lady whom he did not know, to intrude into an acquaintance whether she wished it or not, but yet feeling it impossible to let her go like this. He stood—was it for a moment, or longer?—hesitating, wondering: then rushed after her, meaning to say that she could not possibly cross the park at this hour alone, that she must permit him to accompany her. In his haste he made a dash at the door, threw it open, plunged out into the wide white desert where she had gone. The moon shone full upon all the breadth of the park. The ground was higher here, and there was less mist; the pathway wound along for a hundred yards or

so fully visible; but no one was there. 'Again!' he cried, speaking the word aloud in his confusion and annoyance. The bushes indeed clustered thick upon the way to the keeper's cottage. Could this be a second niece, a daughter, another young woman living there? He was so vexed, so disappointed, so tantalised, that he did not know what to do or say.

'Has Ferney a daughter as well as a niece?' he said to Maud, singling her out again, her mother remarked, from all the rest.

'A daughter? Oh, no; nobody but Jane. They brought her up; but that is all. Why do you take so much interest in the Ferneys, Edmund? You have always known them, ever since you first came here.'

Then Edmund told his story. How once more he had seen the strange lady: how she had passed through the door, and once more gone down the keeper's way; or, at least, so he supposed. Had she gone to the village he must have seen her. This time Maud became excited, too. She took her mother into council. 'Mother, do you know anyone who has lately come to the village, or to any of the houses about? I should think she must be a crazy person. Edmund has met her twice in the Lime-tree Walk, in a white dress—'

'Edmund must have been dreaming,' Lady Beresford said.

'Not any more than I am now. I saw her quite plain to-night. There is something in her air, generally, that reminds me of Maud. I thought it was Maud herself playing me a trick the first time I saw her.'

'And dressed in white. Such an extraordinary thing!' said Maud. 'Who can it be?'

This incident of the dress moved the ladies more than it did the man. He had to explain to them exactly what kind of a dress it was that she wore. 'Though I daresay he has not a notion,' said Lady Beresford. 'Probably it is only some light colour. Men never know—'

A slight look of uneasiness got into her face. She listened as the dress was described with reluctance, trying to change the subject; but the others were very much interested. 'A dress not like anything you ladies wear now,' Edmund said.

'A dress, I should say, very like what the art people wear. It must be some artistic person who has taken lodgings in the village,' said Mrs. Cole, who was Lady Beresford's sister. 'Depend upon it that is what she is, an art-student, not rich, living in some little rooms, studying the effects of a winter landscape, or something of that sort. Perhaps Ferney has let her his parlour. Hasn't he got a parlour? That is what this strange visitor must be.'

This was not quite so objectionable to Edmund's feelings as the other guess, and the talk got quite animated about his lady. Only Lady Beresford did not quite like it. 'Please not to say anything about her to Sir Robert,' she said; 'he is not fond of strangers about.' And she was visibly uneasy. But no one could tell why.

As for Edmund himself, his mind was very much occupied with this pretty vision. He thought, with a thrill all through him, of the soft look of surprised pleasure that had come over her face as he took off his hat. Why should she be surprised? It was a thing any gentleman ought to have done, meeting her there, all alone, a stranger in the place, where he was himself at home. The thing he regretted was that he had not been a little quicker, that he had not followed her out, and asked her to let him see her safely across the park. Perhaps she would not have liked that. Perhaps the suggestion that it was not safe to walk about alone might have offended her. But she did not look at all like one of those women who assert a right to walk alone, and to do whatever pleases them. Anyhow, he would not let her escape him so another time; and no doubt he would meet her again. After this he was continually haunting the Lime-tree Walk. The last day of the skating he made an excuse to return early, but she was not there; and, indeed, he did not see her again till his heart had been sick with disappointment on two or three occasions. The frost broke up; then came a day or two of rain, and all the bondage of the ice melted, and the paths ran in little torrents, and a few feeble spikes of snowdrops began to come up in the empty flower-beds. The weather grew mild all of a sudden. And one day the hounds met near Daintrey, and all the party went out. They came back in the afternoon, tired, and damp, and soiled with the mud; but when the others went in to be warmed and dried, and made comfortable, having had enough of air and exercise for the day, Edmund lingered outside, as he now always did, as long as he could get any excuse for doing so. And this time he was rewarded. In the middle of the Lime-tree Walk he saw her suddenly coming towards him. One moment there had seemed to be nobody about. He turned his head to see what was meant by some little stir behind him; and when he turned again she was there, walking towards him, with her soft, gentle, composed tread. Her hands were clasped before her. Her white dress trailed a little behind her, but seemed to have no stain upon it, or mark of the wet. Her head was a little thrown back. Ah, yes! surely they were blue, those eyes; they could not have been anything but blue. And she had very little colour in her face, just enough to make it lifelike, and give an appearance of health and perfection; no sickliness, no incompleteness, was in the hue. The soft little half-smile was still upon the lips—lips that were like rose-coral, not very red, but warm and soft. She came on without paying any attention to Edmund, as if, indeed, she did not see him. And this piqued him a little. But his heart leaped so at the sight of her that he was not capable of cool judgment or criticism. This time his mind was made up. If it was rude, he was very sorry, but he must speak to her, whatever happened. He stopped suddenly when they met, and once more took off his hat. And then, in a moment, like the sun rising, that expression of pleasure came to her face. The smile grew brighter. She stopped, too, and looked at

him with such satisfaction, such a tender interest in her eyes, that he was utterly confounded, and stood gazing at her, the words that he had meant to say failing him. Rude! no, evidently she did not think him rude. A gentle delight seemed to spread over her—affectionate pleasure, as if of a happiness she had vainly expected, and for which she was thankful beyond words. After all, it was she who spoke first. She said, in the softest little musical voice, a little thin, but sweet, like the cooing of a dove; and what she said was as remarkable in its simplicity as the fact that she was the first to begin the acquaintance. ‘So you see me!’ was, in tones of gentle pleasure, what she said.

‘See you!—indeed this is now the third time that I have the pleasure of seeing you,’ said Edmund eagerly. ‘The last night I could not forgive myself for not asking if I might walk home with you. It was very late for you to walk alone across the park.’

To this she answered nothing, but looked at him with the softest, caressing looks, as if it were a pleasure to her to hear his voice; and yet the perfect modesty, simplicity, and innocence of the virginal countenance uplifted to him, made every thought but those of respect and even reverence impossible to Edmund. At the same time he was slightly abashed by this stedfast look, which might have made a vain man complacent, but for something in it of unapproachable purity and isolation which gave the beholder a sense of awe. Edmund did not know how to go on. It was more difficult than could be told to proceed in the conversation. Phrases about the happiness of making her acquaintance—about the desire of the ladies at Daintrey to know if they could be of service to the stranger, which he had (though totally without authority) conned and prepared, no longer seemed within his power of utterance. He stammered forth something about ‘Lady Beresford—would be glad to see you—to be of use.’ To which she shook her head half sadly, half with a kind of shadowy amusement. ‘You have come to the neighbourhood lately?’ he said at last.

‘No; oh, no; I have been here—about Daintrey—a long, long time.’ These strange words were interrupted by a little faint laugh like an echo, like a laugh in music, the most spiritual liquid roll of soft words. ‘I have been a long time here.’

Edmund grew more and more confused. ‘If that was so I must have seen you,’ he said; ‘but perhaps you think a little time long. It would be natural, you are so young.’

‘Nineteen,’ she said; ‘I never was any more than nineteen; but it is a long, long time ago.’

Then it began to dawn upon Edmund, though it was an idea he received with the greatest reluctance, that this tender, beautiful creature must be, not mad—that was too harsh a word—but like Ophelia, distraught. ‘Do you come out alone?’ he said, gently. ‘Is there no one with you in these winter nights? it is dreary and cold in the park. I don’t think you ought to be alone.’

She smiled upon him, again not saying anything for a moment. Then she said suddenly and very low, 'I am always about here.'

'You mean you are fond of this walk,' Edmund said.

Again she smiled. 'I go all about,' she said, very softly, 'sometimes into the house; but no one sees me. That is what made me so glad when you spoke. I have seen you often, but you are confused with the other ones. So many, so many I have seen. Now that you have spoken to me I will always remember which is you.'

Certainly she must be distraught. He was very sorry for her, very much touched by her, but also, though why he could not tell, a little alarmed, his heart beating very unsteadily and plunging in his breast.

'I hope,' he said, 'not out of any intrusive or impertinent feeling, but for safety, I hope you will let me see you home.'

Again he heard the little roll of the laugh, so utterly soft and distant; but she made no reply. 'I have seen a great many, a great many,' she said; 'they all come and go, but they do not see me. That is the punishment I have. The house is altered. But I take a great interest in it: I was always fond of it.' Then the innocent little laugh was succeeded by a gentle, scarcely audible sigh.

All this time the evening had been darkening, the sun had set, the mists were creeping up once more in all the hollows. Edmund felt a chill run through him. 'It is getting late,' he said, 'and cold. If you are going to the village it is a long walk. Forgive me, but I think you should let me take you home.'

She looked at him almost mocking, but with such a tender version of mockery; then turned and went towards the door in the wall. Her movements were so gentle and light that Edmund felt himself noisy, stumbling, awkward in every step he took. Her little feet seemed scarcely to touch the earth. He walked on beside her confused, trembling, afraid, yet full of a strange happiness; and the moon, which had been rising all the time, came shining upon them through the lofty, slender lime branches. It seemed to him, in his bewildered condition, that it was like some poem he had read, or some dream he had dreamt, to walk thus in this measured soft cadence, with the moon upon their heads all broken and chequered by the anatomy of the great trees, like dark lines traced upon the sky. Then they came into the full moonlight, in the corner where the urn stood upon its pedestal. It seemed to Edward that she went more slowly, as if lingering. 'This is a gloomy corner,' he said, forcing himself to speak. For the charm of the silence had come over him, and words seemed hard things to disturb those soft moments as they flowed away.

'Not gloomy to me. I was always fond of it. When it was put up we were all pleased. That was what was wrong in me. 'You know,' she said, with her little soft laugh, 'I was so fond of the house and the trees, and everything that was our own. I thought there

was nothing better, nothing so good. I was all for the earth, and nothing more. That is why I am here so much.' She paused, and gave a little sigh: but then added, brightening, 'It is not hard: when you are used to it, when now and then you meet with someone who sees you, it is not so hard. I am a little sad sometimes, but very happy now.'

And again she looked at him with that look of tender pleasure—enough to turn any man's head. Edmund's went round and round—he could say nothing more, but stammer, repeating himself, 'It is a long walk; you must let me see you safely home across the park.'

She answered him only by that low laugh, but even softer, sweeter, than before. Then he opened the door for her. As she passed through she smiled upon him with a little wave of her hand. For his part he had put his foot on a soft piece of turf sodden with the rain, and it took him a minute to extricate the heel of his boot which had sunk into it. A minute, scarcely so much as a minute, but when he stepped out eagerly after her, his head full of that walk across the park, she was nowhere to be seen. One minute, not so much. Where was she? How had she managed to elude him? He was wild with disappointment and anger. Once more he made a hurried search behind all the bushes, in every little clump of brushwood. There was not a trace of her; though he thought once he heard her low melodious laugh. Was it a trick she was playing him? What was the meaning of it? But when he had walked about for nearly an hour, Edmund had to go back to the house disappointed. Once more she had escaped him; his head was giddy, his heart beating loud, his whole being full of agitation and excitement. What did it mean? and who was she, this mysterious girl?

Edmund felt like a man in a dream as he came downstairs, and sat among the party at table, where the meal went on amid cheerful conversation. For himself he seemed quite incapable of taking any share in it. It flowed round him like something in which he had no voice. Afterwards the ladies asked him in the drawing-room, their voices coming to him faintly as out of a cloud, whether he had seen the white lady again. But it was impossible to him to speak of her to-night. He answered briefly, saying no, though it was not true; and pretended to have letters to write, that universal excuse for pre-occupation. But when he escaped from the circle on this pretence, he did not write any letters. He sat in his room, opening his window, though the night was not so balmy as to make this desirable; and with his head supported by his hands, gazed out upon the great darkness round. The moon set early, and the skies were veiled with clouds, and nothing was discernible but the dark outlines of the trees, and a great dimness of space and air. Now and then he almost thought he saw her below, a flicker of white moving about, as if it might have been her dress; and it was only by strenuous resolution that he kept himself from rushing wildly into the night, with a kind of mad hope of meeting her. Then he gathered toge-

ther in his mind all that she had said, which was so sweet, so tender, and yet, God help him, so wild. 'When you meet with someone who sees you'—'I was nineteen—but it is long, long ago.' What could it mean? Was it, indeed, the sweet bells jangled out of tune, of some lovely nature? Edmund's eyes filled with tears. He said to himself that if it was so, he would take more care of her than anyone; he would be her tender protector, her keeper to preserve her from everything that could hurt her innocence. What a strange fatal charm was it that had fallen upon him thus unawares? He could think of nothing else. Ophelia—but far more sweet in her madness—pure as a vision, with that dear look of happiness in her face. Could anything be more sweet than that she should be happy when he spoke to her, her face full of pleasure at the sound of his voice? Edmund's heart melted altogether at this thought. But those sweet fairy-tricks should not suffice her another day. He would find her, whatever might happen; he would secure her beyond all possibility of escape. Her reason, what did it matter about her reason. Love would supply the place. And thus he spent the evening in a kind of soft delirium, able to think of nothing, to see and hear nothing, but his new-born yet all-absorbing love.

CHAPTER IV.

EDMUND did not sleep all night. He rose excited and restless, in the dim cold dawn of the winter morning; he was silent as a ghost at the cheerful breakfast table; he excused himself from all the occupations of the day. He had 'things to do,' he said; and in fact he was impatient and unhappy until he found an opportunity to steal out unseen by anyone. He went hastily through the Lime-tree Walk, following exactly the course he had taken the previous evening with *her*. There he contemplated the park in the clear daylight with wondering and anxious scrutiny. The little road down by the back of the green terrace, which led to the keeper's cottage, was the only one by which she could possibly have gone. A little plantation of young trees was at the corner, and as it wound downwards, though the declivity was slight, there were various scattered bushes, furze and broom, and a few old knotted hawthorn thickets, darned out and in with pendants of brambles, showing here and there a red leaf still. There any mischievous girl could have played hide-and-peek with a petulant lover for hours together. Edmund felt a little lightening of the anxiety which possessed him as he saw these interruptions of the way. But if it was indeed by this way she had gone, she could not have afterwards emerged into the park without passing at least by Ferney's cottage. Perhaps, as someone had suggested, she was a lodger there after all. He went slowly towards it, examining every corner of the way, and every bit of cover. His search was so slow and minute that it took him a long time. He emerged upon Ferney's little enclosure almost before he was aware.

When his step was heard on the gravel, someone came to the window to see who it was, and Edmund heard a little exclamation. 'Aunt! here's that gentleman again.' Was he, then, coming to some real elucidation of all his wonderings? Mrs. Ferney came to the half-open door in answer to his summons. He thought she looked a little disturbed. He spoke peremptorily, to leave her no room for thought, or settling beforehand what she was to say. 'I want to know if you have a lodger—a lady living in your house?'

Mrs. Ferney's countenance grew more disturbed than ever. 'Well, sir——, no, Mr. Edmund, I've got no lodger. There's Ferney's niece staying on a visit.'

'Is that your niece sitting in the room on the right hand?' When Edmund said this, a chair was hastily drawn back out of his range of vision, and a voice said, 'La!'

'I mean a totally different person,' he cried, with a little impatience; 'a lady; very young; very slight; with blue eyes; in a white dress, and something black round her shoulders.'

Mrs. Ferney was gazing at him with wide open eyes, but a visible air of relief. 'No, indeed, sir; nothing of the sort. Not a soul lives here but Ferney and me, and, for the present, Ada Jane.'

'Where, then, can she live?' he said half to himself. Mrs. Ferney thought he had taken leave of his senses. She stood and gazed at him with bewildered looks, making a curtsy, and much relieved to see that he was not 'after' Ada Jane. Edmund walked away without so much as a glance at the window where Ada Jane was lurking expectant. He went to the village, where he walked about not knowing what to do, looking in at every window. He could not stop everybody he met there to ask them did they know where he could find a lady with blue eyes and in a white gown? He did the only other thing that was practicable in the circumstances. He went to see the Rector, whom he asked that question, and to whom he told his little story. The Rector was a young man, and he was sympathetic. He thought of all the ladies within twenty miles, and described them, without finding any one who at all resembled the lady whom Edmund sought. 'Besides,' the young enquirer had still so much reason left in him as to say, 'what would it advantage me if Miss Ingestre, who lives fifteen miles off, were like her? Miss Ingestre would not come here and wander about the Lime-tree Walk.' So that nothing was to be made of it in any direction. When he left the Rectory the short afternoon was beginning to wane. He saw nobody along all the length of the way, and when he came to the door in the wall found it locked; evidently she had not passed that way to-day.

It was again a misty afternoon; the sun veiled in clouds. Edmund went down by the path that led towards Ferney's, and got across the brook and round by the corner of the house, which was a way practicable to one who had been a boy there, and knew all about the surroundings and by-ways of the place. What he meant was to hurry

round to the conservatories, in which he was likely to find the head gardener, and get the key from him. What if she should come to her favourite walk and find it closed against her? He was breathless with haste scrambling up the bank, rushing along at his most rapid pace, lest this foolish obstacle should prevent their meeting: when suddenly, in the midst of his excitement, all at once his heart stood still. In spite of the locked door, she was standing there. It was earlier than he had ever seen her before. His heart stopped short, then leapt into wilder beating than ever. He did not ask himself how she got through. Why should he think of any such trivial obstacle? She was there, that was all he thought of; and this time it was evident that she was looking for him. She waved her hand to him with the prettiest gesture. She was standing against the pedestal, her white dress standing out from that background. He noticed for the first time how white and pure was the fulness of the flounce where it fell upon the grass, without a mark on it of the wetness around. This seemed to him quite natural, an exquisite quality, somehow, in herself, which kept everything about her white and pure.

‘I was going,’ he said, flushed and eager, ‘to get the key. I thought you would wonder to find it shut. But you came through before it was shut, I suppose.’

She smiled. It seemed to be a rule with her to answer none of his questions. She looked at him with a sort of innocent admiration, mixed with the pleasure in her face. ‘It is so long since I have spoken to anyone—since I have seen anyone run to meet me,’ she said. ‘I wonder how it is that you, out of them all—’

‘Yes,’ he said, taking up her words, ‘that is what I cannot understand, how I, of all the people in Daintrey, should have been so happy as to meet you. We are like old friends now, are we not? we have seen each other so often. I am Edmund Coventry, once Sir Robert’s ward, and free of the house. Might I ask your name?’

There was no embarrassment in her face. From first to last she was never embarrassed, but always full of sweet composure: and her smile seemed to express a hundred different feelings. There was amusement in it, and a little regret, and always that affectionate pleasure. ‘I was Maud,’ she said, quite simply. Edmund could not understand why she should put her name in the past tense, and it gave him a subtle, little thrill of pain, he could scarcely tell why.

‘Maud—it is the very sweetest name,’ he said, with a half-adoring passion; ‘but what else? You will not let me say Maud. Tell me your other name.’

What a strange smile it was! It seemed to go on like an accompaniment in music, confusing the listener who was so anxious to gather every word that came from her lips. He did not seem to know that she had not said anything, so full was the air of that sweet influence. A little while after he began again to speak himself.

‘These meetings have made a change in my life,’ he said. ‘I was

taking the future quite easily, not thinking what it was to bring forth; but now I see that one ought to select one's path, to settle, to take up the more serious part of life. All this I have learned since I have known you; since I have loved you,' he added, very low, looking earnestly in her face.

She took the confession quite calmly; not a tinge of additional colour, not the slightest shyness or confusion appeared in her. She kept her quiet, sweet, ease of manner undisturbed. And what was Edmund to say more? He felt somehow baffled, helpless, before this invulnerable calm.

'Won't you say anything to me?' he cried; 'I don't know who you are, or where you are living, but I love you, Maud. Do not be angry.'

'Oh, no! Not angry,' she said, in her soft voice; 'only you cannot understand. I am not here to make friends, though I have always wished that someone might see me and speak. And before you spoke I had noticed you; I thought to myself, This one surely—this one surely! There was something about you; but there had been so many, so many before,' she said, with an innocent, wistful look, like the unconscious protest against neglect, yet acquiescence of a child.

'But you will give me an answer, Maud? I love you, sweet. I do not know,' said Edmund, with passion, 'what has happened to you; what it is that makes you wander like this; but I will not mind, whatever it is. I will take care of you; I will watch over you; it will make no difference to me. Do you not understand me, dear?' He put out his hand to take hers, to secure her attention, to show her how serious he was. And then Edmund felt as if the whole misty heaven and earth were going round about him. He could not find the hand he sought. It was as if some spell prevented him from touching her. He felt again more baffled, more confounded, and hopelessly kept back, than words could say.

'You must not ask me questions,' she made answer, softly, after a pause. 'It is not permitted to answer questions. I am here—for a time. I have been here no one could tell how long. We do not count as you do. If I told you more than this you would not understand.'

'I will understand if it is about you. But, Maud, Maud, answer me first. Give me your hand. Won't you give me your hand?'

A look of trouble came into her face; yet so soft, so shadowy, that it did not seem pain. The smile did not go out of her eyes. She shook her head gently, standing so near him, her hands crossed, clasping each other. He had only to put out his arms and take her into them, but he could not. She was close, close to him, and yet—what was it that stood between? Not the mild refusal with which she shook her head; something that chilled his blood in its ardour, and made his heart contract with awe. He put out his hands beseeching, but seemed to come no nearer; and yet she did not draw back, nor move away from him. Edmund did not seem to

himself to know what he was saying, what was happening, and yet he heard and meant every word that rushed to his lips. 'Sweet! I will understand anything; I know there must be something strange. Whatever it is I accept it, I accept it! Say you will love me, Maud! Say you will—marry me!'

What happened? One of the Beresford boys, as Edmund dimly perceived, had been approaching, rushing along towards the door; but somehow the intruder had made no difference to him, and had not stopped him in his impassioned suit. At this moment, however, the boy rushed headlong past, dashing against her, touching Edmund's coat as he plunged along. The lovely, gentle figure was straight in his way. Edmund caught him by the throat with a fury beyond words.

'The lady!' he stammered out; 'you brute, do you not see the lady?' and flung him wildly to a distance upon the wet ground.

Fred Beresford was altogether taken by surprise. He was not a boy of a patient temper, and he was in a hurry; but the wildness of the other bewildered him. He picked himself up, and came forward wondering, to where Edmund stood, pale as death, and gazing wildly about him. Fred's wrath was entirely quailed at this sight. 'What is it?' he asked, quite timidly and softly laying his hand on Edmund's arm.

The young man was trembling in every limb; he did not seem able to move. His eyes were staring wildly here and there. There was no softening dusk as yet to conceal anything; all was white daylight, cold and pale and clear. When he felt Fred's touch he turned upon him for one second, furious, violently thrusting him away. 'You have killed her!' he said; and then clutching the boy again, 'Where is she? where is she? where is she?' Edmund cried. Fred felt the whole trembling weight of his companion upon him. His boyish strength swayed under the burden.

'Are you ill, old fellow?' he said, alarmed. 'What is the matter? I thought you were saying poetry. I don't know what you mean about a lady.'

'You have killed her,' he said, wildly clutching the boy's throat; then, all in a moment, he softened, and burst into a transport of cries. 'Where is she? where is she? Maud! Maud! come back to me,' cried the young man, with a voice of despair. There was nothing to be seen, Fred swore afterwards, nothing, except the big stone pedestal with the urn upon it, and behind, the mossy old wall.

'I say—you are ill,' said the boy. 'Come in, that's the best thing to do; come in to mother. Maud's there with her, if it's Maud you want. Edmund, come along.'

Edmund broke from him, pushing him away. He went all round the pedestal, wandering about it, feeling it with his hands. Then he held out those hands piteously, appealing, into the empty air. 'Maud! Maud!' he cried. 'Don't laugh at me; don't play with me,' as if he were talking to somebody, the astonished boy described. Fred at last ran in alarmed to the library where Sir Robert was sitting. 'I

wish you'd come out, father, into the Lime-tree Walk to Edmund—he's gone mad,' the boy cried.

When Sir Robert went out, Edmund was standing leaning against one of the lime trees, gazing at the green space which contained the pedestal and the urn. When he was entreated to come in, he answered quite gently, that if he only waited patiently she would be sure to come back. 'This is where she always comes. She is fond of this place,' he said. 'There are things I don't understand about her, but she will come. I am sure she will come if you will only let me wait.' 'Tell me, my good fellow, all about it,' Sir Robert said. He was a kind man when his attention was fully roused, and now he remembered that his wife had told him something of a strange lady whom Edmund had seen in the park. Edmund told him the whole story, standing there with his back against the tree. He asked Sir Robert first to stand close to him, almost behind him, that nothing might interfere with his clear vision round. And then he told him all. 'She always tricks me,' he said, with an attempt at a laugh. 'She is so innocent—like a child. How she got away this time I cannot tell. There seems nothing to hide behind here. But she always does it. I confess, sir,' he added, with great candour and gravity, 'there are many things about her I do not understand; but whatever they are, I am ready to accept them all.'

'Have you ever seen her more than once in the same day?' asked Sir Robert. 'No?' 'Then come with me, Edmund, it is of no use waiting. I think I can tell you something about her.' Sir Robert put his arm into that of the young man. He scarcely knew himself what he meant; but it was clear that something must be done. And Edmund yielded to the mingled reason and temptation. No, he had never seen her twice the same day; and to know about her, was not that what he wanted most in the world? He suffered himself, after one long glance around, to be led away.

Sir Robert took him upstairs to an old gallery which he remembered very well as a child, which had been given up to the children's romps on wet days, a place full of pictures, the accumulations of an old house—all kinds of grim portraits of early Beresfords. There were some good pictures among them, he had always remembered to have heard said, and so long as Edmund could recollect there had been an intention expressed of disinterring these treasures. 'I don't know where it is exactly; I don't know if it is still here. It was by a pupil of Sir Joshua's, and with something of his feeling. I have always intended to bring it downstairs,' Sir Robert said, rummaging as he spoke among old dusty canvasses. Edmund stood by listless, in the lull of reaction after his great excitement. It was not here, he thought, that anything would be told him about *her*. He did not understand what his companion meant. He was only waiting, feeling hazily that he had some further trial of patience to go through, not very anxious now for anything but the end of the day, and that another might dawn, on which, perhaps, he might see her again.

'Was she like this,' said Sir Robert, at last. Edmund went after him slowly, languidly, to the square of light in front of the great window whither he was dragging a picture in an old-fashioned black frame. Then the young man gave a great cry.

There she stood looking out of the old canvas with the smile he knew so well—her blue eyes looking upwards, the soft curves about her mouth, her hands clasped before her, and every detail exactly as he had seen her an hour ago; the white dress with its flounce, the black scarf with all its little frills. Then he fell down on his knees before the beautiful little figure, with a cry which was half alarm and half joy.

Sir Robert drew his breath quick; in fact, he had not been prepared for such success to his experiment. He was confounded by the explanation he had himself suggested. 'Do you mean that this is—the person,' he said, in a husky voice, and glanced round him with a certain shrinking. His ruddy countenance paled. 'I should prefer,' he said, with a little difficulty, 'to tell you the story in my own room. But turn first to the back of the picture and look at the date. Now come along. I don't like this vacant old place.'

Edward looked at the date; it did not convey any particular idea to his mind.

'Seven, seven, seven,' he said to himself; seven is one of the numbers of perfection. It must be that the painter had meant. Otherwise it made no impression upon him. He went down to the library, having first placed the picture carefully in the light where he could come and worship it again. Sir Robert sat down in his usual chair, looking pale. 'Sit down, Edmund,' he said, 'my poor boy. I am afraid you are not in your usual health. You must see the doctor; you must try change of scene.'

'What has that to do with it?' said Edmund, astonished. 'You were to tell me who she is—that is of far more importance to me than my health, which is excellent, all the same. Who is she? You gave me your promise——'

'Is ——?' said Sir Robert. 'Edmund, my dear fellow, you must have heard the story, though you don't remember it. It must have excited your imagination. Did you notice the date on the picture? I told you to look at it.'

'The date! What has that to do with it? Seven, seven, I forget what it was.'

'Seventeen hundred and seventy-seven,' said Sir Robert, solemnly. 'Seventeen hundred and seventy-seven—nearly a hundred years ago.'

There was no intelligence in Edmund's eyes. 'I knew there must be something strange about her,' he said; 'it would be vain to conceal that from one's self. There are many things I don't understand—but I am willing to accept—anything, Sir Robert——'

'Edward!' cried Sir Robert, almost wildly, 'command yourself. You don't seem to see. My dear fellow, this is all a delusion. You have seen no lady. It has been your imagination working. How in

the name of all that is reasonable could you see a woman who has been dead for a hundred years?’

The young man looked up startled. Confusion seemed to envelop everything round him. ‘A hundred years,’ he said to himself, wondering: then laughed, and repeated, ‘I saw no lady? I am going to marry her, Sir Robert.’

‘God bless us all!’ said Sir Robert, with a voice of terror. ‘Edmund, my dear fellow—Edmund, see a doctor, see a clergyman. I’ll send for old Parkins and for the Rector. You can’t, you can’t go on like this, you know.’

Edmund’s brain was still too much confused to take in any impression from what was said. ‘A hundred years,’ he repeated to himself, with a smile. ‘It is strange; but I always felt there was something strange. I told you there were many things I did not understand. But what may be the meaning—this hundred years? Is this all you have to tell me, sir?’ he continued, trying to wake up from the confused sense of mystery, yet almost of pleasure, which the picture brought him. He did not understand it—but then in the whole matter there was so little that he could understand.

‘All,’ Sir Robert said. He was in great excitement and distress. ‘I don’t want the ladies to know if we can help it. Don’t say anything to them, I entreat of you. And, my dear boy, if you would go and lie down, I will send for Parkins to come directly. I’ll have the Rector up in half an hour. It will yield to remedies—it will yield to remedies,’ Sir Robert said.

‘I am quite well,’ said Edmund. To him it seemed that Sir Robert was going out of his senses. ‘But I will not keep you longer, and I will say nothing to the ladies. In the meantime,’ he added, in his confusion, I have got—some letters to write.’

‘The very best thing you can do; occupy yourself—occupy yourself, my dear fellow,’ said Sir Robert, patting him on the shoulder. Edmund felt that his guardian was glad to be rid of him. Perhaps it was not wonderful that Sir Robert did not understand him; he did not understand himself. His head was confused as if the fog had got into it. To some things he seemed to attach no importance at all, while others were quite clear to him, and had all their natural weight. ‘Seventeen, seven, seven.’ He repeated this over to himself with a smile, but whether it was a charm, or a fact, or what it was, he could not tell; on the other hand, he thought the precaution about the ladies was quite right. And he could not appear without betraying that something had happened to him. He sent word downstairs by his servant that he had caught a cold and was going to keep his room; and there he received the visit of old Dr. Parkins with much conscious amusement, but would not say a word to him of what had befallen him, and utterly confounded the old doctor, who could say nothing but that his pulse was excited, and that it would be necessary for him to keep quiet for a day or two. Then the Rector came, much abashed, as a man called upon to minister to a mind diseased,

and knowing nothing about it, was likely to be. When they were gone Edmund spent the night alone. He wrote a long letter to—he did not know whom—giving an account of the whole, so little as there was of it, and so much. ‘I know there is something strange,’ he wrote, ‘but nothing to prevent me taking the charge of her, taking care of her. An hour a day of her will be more to me than twenty-four of any other. I know there are things which I can’t understand.’ When he had done this it was late, and all the family had gone to bed. He heard them going one by one—a sound of steps in the long passages, mounting the stairs, a little gleam of the passing lights under his door. By and by silence fell upon everything. There was no sound or stir anywhere—all silent, all dark, the doors shut fast, soft waves of quiet breathing going through the house. He came out with his light in his hand and stood for a moment on the threshold of his door—an adventurer bound upon a last voyage, a sailor setting out into unknown seas. Then he went up, up to the upper part of the house, past all the closed doors, moving quietly through lines of unseen sleepers on every side. The great house was as silent as the grave.

The moon was shining full from the west, just about to set, as she had risen, early. There was a large west window in the gallery, and this was full of silvery light pouring in, making all white and dazzling. The portrait, which had been drawn towards this window to get the evening light, stood there still, receiving the white illumination of the moonlight. Edmund walked up—holding in his hand a candle, which flamed yellow and earthly in that radiance from heaven—through the whiteness, a sort of milky way, with the annals of the past on every side of him. He came to the picture of his love, and threw himself down beside it on the floor. There she stood before him, shadowed in the moonlight—the same, and yet not the same. Something disappointing, narrower, smaller, was in the pictured countenance. As he gazed at it the confusion grew in his mind; all that was real seemed to die away from him. In the vehemence of this sense of loss, he began to speak to her, tears filling his eyes, and her face shining more and more like life through that tremulous medium. ‘Maud! Maud! I do not understand you; I do not know you; but I love you,’ he said in a rapture, not knowing that he said it. Then he came to himself with a gasp. There, close to the frame of the picture, her shoulder touching it, stood the original. He held up his candle, like a yellow flaming torch. For the moment, in the silent moonlight, with all the world asleep around, alone with these two—were they two?—his reason went from him. He raised himself to his knees, and knelt like a devotee before a shrine—his arms widely opened, his face raised, wild with worship: were they two, standing side by side, comparing themselves each to each, or were they one?

‘You have come to me at last—you have come to me—Maud!’

She looked at him as before with her soft smile. There was no

reply in her to his passion. 'I did wrong to speak to you,' she said; 'you do not understand. I was so pleased that you saw me. No one sees me. I come and go, sometimes out, sometimes in. I go to their rooms and they do not see me. Then when I find one that will speak—that will smile, I am glad.' There came from her, mingled together, the soft laugh and the sigh, that made his heart stand still. 'But no more—but no more,' she said.

And there seemed to creep about him a chill. He had never felt it before. When he had seen her first all had been soft as her looks, delightful as the bloom on her face. The bloom was still on her face, but shaded as by a mist. Nor could he see as he did before. The moonlight confused the soft features—or perhaps it was his yellow flaming human candle, not everlasting like the other light, ready to burn out and extinguish itself. His strength and his senses seemed to fail.

'I do not understand,' he cried; 'I do not understand! but whatever it is, I accept—I accept. Dead or living, Maud, Maud, come with me—let us be together! Come!' he said, stretching his arms wildly.

She did not draw back nor move, but neither did he touch her with his longing arms. Did fear seize them half-way extended? He could not tell. They dropped down by his side, and his heart dropped, sinking within him. She stood before him unmoved—always the same calm, the half smile on her lips, her blue eyes pleased and tender. Then she shook her head slowly, gently.

'It is not permitted. I told you I had loved the earth and all that was on it: and now I am earthbound. I could not go if I would, and I would not if I could. What we have to do, that is what we love best. But I never thought that you would mistake so much—that you would not understand. Now I know why there are so few that see us. It is to keep them from harm,' she said with a soft sigh. 'Ah me! when the only thing we long for, it is sometimes to speak—but I will never wish for it more—'

'Maud!' He threw himself at her feet again with a great cry. 'Touch me—mark me, that I may be yours always. If not in life, yet in death. Say we shall meet when I die.'

Once more she shook her head. 'How can I tell? I do not know you in the soul. You will do what is appointed; but do not be sorry, you will like to do it,'* she said, with her sweet look of tender pleasure. 'Good-bye, brother—good-bye!'

'I will not let you go!' he cried: 'I will not let you go!' and seized her in his arms.

Then in Edmund's head was a roaring of echoes, a clanging of noises, a blast as of great trumpets and music; and he knew no more.

* Prima vuol ben; ma non lascia il talento
Che divina giustizia contra voglia,
Come fù al peccar, pone al tormento.

‘Edmund is not in his room ; his bed has not been slept in,’ said Lady Beresford, coming hastily upstairs next morning immediately after she had gone down. Sir Robert had not yet left his dressing-room. She was pale and full of alarm. ‘His door was open ; there is no trace of him. I have sent out over all the park. He must have left the house last night. And Fred tells me the strangest story. What is it, Robert?’ Sir Robert was very much disturbed himself, but he would make no certain reply.

‘I daresay he will be found wandering about somewhere. He has got some nonsense in his head.’ Then he hurried down to the Lime-tree Walk, and out to the park, looking under the bushes and trees. If he had found Edmund there lying white and stark, Sir Robert would not have been surprised. They searched for him all the morning, but found no trace anywhere. Later in the day, Sir Robert suddenly bethought himself of another possibility. He hurried up to the old gallery, calling his eldest son to go with him. And there, indeed, they found Edmund—lying on the floor. But not dead, nor raving ; pale enough, pale as a ghost, but asleep ; his candle long ago burnt out to the socket, and the soft little face he had loved, placidly watching over him from the picture, as unmoved, though not so sweet, as the vision he had seen.

It cannot be said that Edmund Coventry was well enough to leave Daintrey that day, nor for several days. But he went away as soon as it was possible, going off from the great door, and by the drive, not approaching the Lime-tree Walk. He had no brain-fever, nor any other kind of fever. Various changes were perceptible, the Beresfords thought, in his life ; but other people were unconscious of them. He had always been a gentle soul, friendly, and charitable, and true. More than a year after, when he met his former guardian and family in town, the old intercourse was renewed, and that came to pass which Lady Beresford had always thought would be so very suitable. He married Maud, and made her a very good husband. But he would never go to Daintrey again. And though there have been a great many versions of the story scattered abroad, and the Beresfords, once so silent on the subject, have become in their hearts a little proud of it—though it is supposed against their will that it should be known—no one else, so far as we have ever heard, has been again accosted by the gentle little lady who was earthbound. Perhaps her time of willing punishment is over, and she is earthbound no more.

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