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THE LAND OF SUSPENSE.

A STORY OF THE SEEN AND UNSEEN.

I.

THE young man set out upon his walk at the entrance of a broad valley, through which there was visible here and there the glimmer of a great river. It was broken in outline by many little hills, such as one sees in the loveliest part of Italy, each crowned by its little groups of habitations, in varied and delightful inequalities of height and form, which seemed to throw a radiance of life and living over the beautiful green slopes, fields, and trees in which these points of light and peace were set. Lines of blue hills receding towards the distant peaks, which were great enough to be called mountains, stretched in noble ridges on either side; and the landscape was one which filled the traveller with a sense of beauty and satisfaction, while drawing his mind and his steps on by a hundred suggestions of fairer things still unrevealed. And the morning was fresh and sweet, beyond even that "innocent brightness of the newborn day," of which few can resist the charm. The sky was flooded with the early sunshine. The valley glowed under it with the dew still undried upon the grass, much of which was half buried in flowers, and soft with the whiteness of the daisies rejoicing in the light. The young man had come over a pass between the hills when this prospect bursting upon him for a moment took away his breath—but it was only for a moment. He paused to gaze upon the road before him, and then with a delight-

ful consciousness that his walk would bring him into fuller possession of this new world unknown to him, he set out upon his way.

The curious thing was, that he did not know where he was going, nor what place this was, nor the direction in which it would lead him, though all the while he walked quickly on with the sure and certain steps of a man familiar with every turn of the path. For some time he went on, unconscious of this, or at least without thinking of it in the ease of his being. He had always been fond of walking, and there was a pleasure in the mere sense of movement, after some recent absence from that delight—absence and confinement which he was aware of, though he could not render to himself any reason for it. He was in full career, feeling as if his foot just touched and no more the path which was not then a highroad but a winding path across the slopes, upon which the flowery fields encroached—when it first occurred to him hazily with a happy sense of amusement that he did not in the least know where he was going. No matter—he was going as if he very well knew where: and there came into his mind a scrap of lovely verse, about "a spirit in my feet," and he began to sing it to himself as he went on. Certainly there was a spirit in his feet that knew better where he was going than he.

Thus he went, without pause

or weariness, for a long way,—so long, that at last he began to wonder how it was that the daylight did not change, that there was no difference in the skies to correspond with the hours which he must have been walking. In himself he was like the day, unchanged, without the faintest suggestion of fatigue ; and it was only by the long vista behind him, and the distance of the hills from which he had come, that he felt how long a time he had been afoot. When this thought occurred to him he sat down upon the low embankment which marked the line of the wood, for he had by this time reached the highway—to rest, as he said to himself, though he felt no need of rest—really to measure with his eyes the length of the valley before him, which went widening away into the blue recesses of distant hills, so that you could trace no end to it. The highroad led along the side of the river at this point, through groups of beautiful trees ; and at some distance on the other side there was planted a great town spreading far back into the valley, which seemed, from the inequalities of its buildings, to be built on innumerable little hills, and shone white under the sunshine with many towers and spires, in great stateliness and beauty. It was here for the first time that the traveller saw any concourse of people. Upon the slopes he had met but few, mostly solitary individuals, with here and there a group of friends. They were a people of genial countenance, smiling, and with friendly looks ; but it surprised and a little wounded him that they took no notice of him, did not give him so much as a Good morning—nay, even pushed him off the path, though without the least appear-

ance of any unkindly feeling. As he sat upon the roadside and watched the people of this unknown land coming and going across the bridge from the town, his heart was moved within him by the sight of so many fellow-creatures, all, as it seemed, so gay, so kind, so friendly, but without a sign or look as if they recognised his existence at all. It seemed to him a long time since he had exchanged a word with any one, and a great sense of loneliness took possession of him. He had not felt this upon the little-frequented paths from which he had come ; but here, among so many, to receive not even a look from any passer-by seemed to him an injury and a disappointment which it was hard to bear.

He reflected, however, that in the country from which he came such a thing might easily have happened with a wandering foreigner resting upon the roadside, whom nobody knew : yet he was scarcely comforted by this thought, for he felt sure that at least such a stranger would have been looked at, if no more—would have met the questioning of many eyes, some with perhaps a smile in them, and all curious to know what he did there. Even curiosity would have been something : it would have been kinder than to ignore him completely as these people were doing : yet there was nothing in their look to make him believe that they were unfeeling or discourteous. After a while he felt that he could bear this estrangement from his kind no longer, and getting up on his feet, he said " Good morning " to a group that were passing, feeling in himself that there was a wistfulness, almost an entreaty in his tone. He saw that they were startled by his address, and looked round

first, as if to see where his voice came from — yet in a moment answered, with what seemed almost an outcry of response and greeting, saying "Good morning," and "God bless you!" eagerly. Then one made himself the spokesman of a group, and advanced a step towards him, yet still with an uncertainty, and eyes that did not exactly meet his, but wavered as if unable to fix his face. "Are you going to our town?" he said; "can any of us be of use to you?" and there was a murmur among all as of assent, "any of us," as if to press help upon him if he needed it: but he required no help — it was only recognition that he wanted, a kind word. "No," he said; "I am going *there*," and he pointed towards the farther end of the valley. A number had gathered round him, all looking at him with great kindness, but with the same uncertainty of gaze, all eagerly bending toward him to hear what he said. Their looks warmed his heart, yet a little repelled him too, as if there was something between him and them which made it better to go on, and try no further communication. "I am going *there*," he repeated, moving a step onward: and immediately they all spoke together in a wonderful accord of voices, saying, "God be with you! God save you! God bless you!" some of them so much in earnest that there seemed to him to be tears in their eyes. There was something in these words which seemed to urge him on, and he resumed his journey, passing through, and looking back upon them, and waving his hand to them in sign of farewell. And they all stood looking after him, calling after him "God bless you!" and "God save you!" until the sense of distance from them melted away, and

his whole being seemed warmed with their kind looks and good wishes. He could hear them, too, all talking together and saying, "It is one of the travellers," to which the others answered again, "God save him!" as if it was the greeting of that country to all that went through.

Thus he went on again, always keeping his course towards the western end of the valley, and pleased with this encounter, even though there was that something in it which startled him, as he seemed to have startled them. Looking across the river at the city, with all its white terraces shining in the sun, and its high towers and pinnacles against the sky, and the river at its feet reflecting every point and shining height, as if it were another city at the feet of the true town, he thought he had never seen so beautiful a place; but what town it was or who the people were who dwelt there he knew not. All he knew was that they were his fellows, that they had bidden God bless him, that they wished him well: and this gave him great refreshment as he went on, feeling no fatigue, but now more than ever wondering that though he did not know where he was going, he was yet going on straight and swift as if he were sure of the way. For a little time the road ran by the river, but then parted from its winding course, and presently broke into several ways, where a stranger in that place might so easily have lost himself, not knowing which to take. But he found no difficulty, nor even paused to choose his way, going lightly on without any hesitation, as one who knew exactly how the bearings lay.

By this time the sun was lower in the heavens, and a sweet look of evening had come over the

sky—the look which suggests home-going, and that labours of all kinds and travel should be drawing to some end of rest and ease. And since the pause he had made on his journey, short as it was, and his second setting forth, there had stolen into his mind a wonderful sense that he was going, not upon an excursion into an unknown world, but home. The sensation was one that he did not know how to explain to himself, for he knew that it was not the home from which he had come, nor any accustomed place. And he did not know where it was, nor what he might find there; but the impression grew upon him more and more strongly as he went on. And many thoughts came with this thought. He did not think of the home from which he had come. It appeared to him as something far, far away, and different from all that he saw or that surrounded him now. But the thought that he was going home, though not there, brought a seriousness into his thoughts which he had not been conscious of when he set forth first in the morning, in all the enthusiasm of the beautiful unknown place into which he marched forward so confident and full of cheer.

He became more serious now. Vaguely there came into his mind a recollection that his former goings home had not been always happy. There had been certain things in which he was to blame. He could not have said what things, nor how this was, his consciousness and memory being a little blurred, as if something had come between him and the former things which had moved his life; but yet he was vaguely aware that he had been to blame. And his mind filled with all manner of resolutions and

thoughts of a goodness to come, which should be perfect as the face of nature, and the purity of the air and the sky. He said to himself that never again—never again! though his recollection failed him when he tried to make clear to himself what it was which should never again be. It was vague to him, leaving only a sense that all had not been as this was about to be; but yet the fervour of his conviction of the better things to come was as intense as if he had perfectly conceived what there was to be done, and what there had been. Never again, never again!—no more as of old: but all perfect and spotless in the new. These resolutions distilled into his mind like dew, they shed themselves through his being like some delightful balm, refreshing him as though his heart had grown dry, but now was filled with calm and a quiet happiness of hoping and anticipation, though he did not know what he anticipated any more than what it was which had made a shadow in the past.

In this mood he began again to ascend a little upon a path which broke off from the highway towards one of the little towns or villages raised above the level of the valley, with towers and trees mingling on the little height, which made him think of an old Tuscan picture. He went towards it, with an eagerness rising within him and a confidence that it was here that his destination was. All the day long he knew that he had been travelling to this spot, and recognised it though he knew it not. He went on unhesitating, gradually making out the ranges of building, which were of beautiful architecture, though in a style unknown to him, with graceful pinnacles rising as light as foam against the sky, and open arcades and halls,

cool and bright, where every door stood open, and he could see sheer above him as he mounted the winding way the groups of men and women in the houses, and many faces at the windows looking out, as if on the watch for some one who was coming. Were any of them looking out for him he wondered to himself? without any sense that it was unlikely there should be watchers looking for him in a place where he had never been before, in an unknown country which was strange to all his previous knowledge.

But no restraining consciousness like this was on him as he hastened up the steep way, and suddenly turning round the corner of the wall, which was wreathed with blossoming plants in a glow of colour and fragrance, came in sight of the wide and noble gateway all open, with its pillars glowing in the westering light, and no sign of bolt or bar or other hindrance to shut out any wayfarer. In front of it stood a group of figures, which seemed to be on the watch for some one. Did they expect some prince or lordly visitor? were they the warders of the gate? They stood two and two, beautiful in the first glow of youth, their fair, tall, elastic forms clothed in white, with the faint difference which at that lovely age is all that seems to exist between the maiden and the youth. They were like each other as brothers might be, and the traveller felt suddenly with a strange bound of his heart that he knew these faces, though not whom they belonged to, nor who they were. They were as the faces of others whom he had known in the land that was so far off behind him: and all at once he knew that they were looking for no prince or potentate but for himself, all strange as he was, unacquainted

with this place, and with all that was here.

They stood looking far along the valley from that height, and asking each other, "Do you see him? do you see him?" but they did not seem to be aware that he was there, standing close to them, looking at them with eager eyes. He stood silent for a moment, thinking they must perceive him, yet wondering how they would know him, having never seen him before: but soon became impatient and troubled by that pause, and, vexed to be overlooked, said suddenly, "I am here—if perhaps you are looking for me."

They were startled, and turned their faces towards him, but with that strange wistful look as if they saw him not which he had remarked in the people whom he met by the bridge—and then they came hastily forward and surrounded him as if with an angelic guard, and he saw with a strange tremor that tears had come into their eyes. "Oh our brother!" said one, in a voice so full of pity that it seemed to him that he pitied himself, though he knew not why, in sympathy. And "Speak," said the others, "speak, that we may know you." While, "Oh my brother," cried the first again, "it is not thus we hoped to see you." This voice seemed to pierce into his inmost heart, and sadness came over him as if his hope had fallen away from him, and this after all was not his home.

"This is who I am," he said; and he told them his name, and that he had come from afar off, and had come straight here without a pause, thinking that this was his home.

They surrounded him closely, as closely as if they would embrace him, and said to him, but with tears, one speaking with another,

"It is your home : and we are your brothers and your sisters, and we have known you were coming, but hoped that you would come otherwise. But we love you not the less, oh our brother, our brother ! we love you none the less—God save you ! God bless you ! There is no one here that does not love you and bless you and pray for you. Dear brother, son of our mother ! would to God you had but come to us in other wise."

"I cannot tell what you mean," he said, with a trembling coming over him. "If I am your brother, why do you not take me in ? I have travelled far to-day, from the very opening of the valley, and never paused—always thinking that there was home at the end—and now you stand between me and the door, and weep, and will not let me in."

"Brother," they said all together, "brother !" It seemed as if in that word lay all sweetness and consolation and pity and love. The circle seemed to open round him, leaving the great wide doorway full of the low sunshine from the west clear before him, and some one came out and stood upon the threshold and stretched out his hands, calling to him, "My son, my son !"

It seemed to the young man that it wanted but a few steps to carry him to the arms of this man who called to him, and to whom his heart went out as if it would burst from his breast. But he that had walked so lightly all day long and felt no weariness, found himself now as one paralysed, incapable of another step. He stood and gazed piteously at the wide open gate, and him who stood there, and knew that this was the place to which he had been travelling, and the home he desired, and the father that he loved. But he

could not make another step. His feet seemed rooted to the ground. There came from him a great outburst of tears and anguish, and he cried to them, "Tell me, tell me !—why is it I cannot go ?"

The white figures gathered all round him again, as if they would have taken him in their arms, and the first of them spoke, weeping, putting out her hands : "Brother," she said, "those that come here, those that come home, must first be clothed with the building of God, the house not made with hands ; those who are unclothed, as you are, alas ! they cannot come in. Brother, we have no power, and you have no power. The doors are open, and the hearts are open, and would to God you could come in ; but oh, my brother ! what can I say ? It is not for us to speak ; you know——"

"I know," he said, and stood still among them silent, his heart hushed in his bosom, his head bowed down with trouble, hearing them weeping round him, and well aware that he could not go up, not had he the strength of a giant. He stood awhile, and then he said, "My home was never closed to me before ; never have I failed of entrance there and welcome, and my mother's light always burning to guide me. She would have torn me from these stones, and brought me in had she been here. Never, never, was there a question—— ! And yet," he cried, wildly, "you called that earth, and this you call heaven !" This he cried, not knowing what he said : for never before had there been any thought in his mind what the name of this country was.

Then his sister called him by his name, and the sound of his name half consoled him, and half made the contrast more bitter, re-

minding him of that place from whence he came, where his was the innermost seat and the best welcome, while here he was kept outside. "Do not be so sore discouraged," she said, "for one day you will come and enter at the gate with joy, and nothing will be withheld from you; and we will go to the Great Father and plead with Him, that it may be soon, and then your spirit will be no longer unclothed, and all will be well.

"Unclothed!" he cried; "I know not what you mean," and he turned from them, pushing

them from him, and hurried down the winding way which he had ascended with so light a heart. There were still the faces at the windows looking out; but though he would not look at them, he saw that they were troubled, and many voices sounded out upon the sweet air, calling to him, "God save you! God bless you!" over and over again, till the whole world seemed full of the sound. But he took no heed of it as he fled along the way in indignation and bitter disappointment, saying to himself, "And that was called earth, and this they say is heaven."

II.

At the foot of the hill was a wood encircling its base, with many winding paths going through, and yet here and there masses of shadow from the trees, in which a man might hide himself from every eye, and even from the shining of the daylight, which seemed to the young man in all the glory of the sunset to mock him as he fled away from the place which was his home. It was the dimness and the shadow that attracted him now, and not the glory of the western sky or the dazzling of the light. In the very heart of the wood, kept by a circle of great trees standing all around like a bodyguard, there was a little opening—a grassy bank like velvet, all soft with mosses, with little woodland blossoms creeping over the soil, and all the woodland scents and fragrance and sound and silence, far from any sound or sight of men. The young man pushed through the copses and between the great boles of the trees, and flung himself upon the cool and soft and fragrant bank; he flung himself upon his face and hid it there, with a longing to be

rid even of himself and his consciousness in that soft and sheltering shade; but all the while knowing, as he had often discovered before, that however you might cover your eyes, and even burrow in the earth, you could not escape from that most intimate companion, nor shut your ears to his reasonings or his upbraidings. Elsewhere, when one of those moments came, and himself confronted and seized himself, there had always been those at hand who helped him out of this encounter. The crowd, or the tumult and conflict of living, or pleasure, or pain, or some other creature, had stolen in and stopped that conflict. But now was the hour in which there was nothing to intervene.

And at first what was in his mind was nothing but bitter disappointment and rage and shame. He, whose coming back had always been with joy, even when it came with tears, before whom every door had been thrown open, and whom all about him had thanked with wistful looks for coming home: but now he was shut out. This was too great an event, too un-

looked for, to permit any other thought beside it. He remembered himself of all the dear stories of his youth, of him whom his father saw afar off and rushed to meet him, not waiting for the confession that was on his lips. And that was how hitherto it had happened to him : and here, where he now was, was not this the most mercifullest place of all, where everything was love and forgiveness? He said this to himself, not realising what place it was, not knowing anything, though he had seized upon the name of heaven in his first horror of wonder and upbraiding, to point the bewailing and reproach. For a long time he lay with his hot brow pressed against those soft couches of moss, closing out with his hands the light from his eyes, in a despair and anguish unspeakable—asking himself why he had come here at all, to be rejected and shut out? Why, why had he not taken another path he wot of, and plunged, and gone— Where? where? He caught his sobbing breath, that burst from his bosom like a child's, in heavings and sore reiterations of distress. Where? where? There would have been welcome in that place ; and bands of jovial companions, and noise, and shoutings. Where? he did not know where.

But at last this convulsion and passion softened away, and he raised his head and looked himself in the face. Ah, was not this what I said, I said! Was not this what we thought upon many a morning, to forget it ere the night? Was not this what we knew, you and I? but you would not listen or hear. When we saw the mother's light in the window, when the door was thrown open, wide open, did not we know that the time would come—? This was what his other self said in his ear. He leaned his head upon his

hands and looked out in the sweetness of the darkening shade, with fixed eyes that saw nothing except the past, which gripped his heart and stayed his breath and came back upon him in dreadful waves of recollection and consciousness. He saw scenes which he had scorned when he was in them, and loathed, and gone back to, and wallowed, foaming—always with rage and shame of himself. And they had cost him already his other life, and pangs innumerable ; the price which he had paid for nought, hard blood-money for that which was no bread—which he had known to be no bread even while he consumed it—the husks which the swine did eat. That was how the other man had named it, the man whom his father ran to meet and fell on his neck—but not here. There had been to himself also those who fell upon his neck and forgave him before he said a word—but not here.

This was not how he had felt when he set out this morning upon the beautiful way in the sunshine. He had been sure then that all was well : every evil thought had departed out of his mind ; his heart was tender and soft, loving God and man, and the thought of a life in which there should be no reproach, no shadow, no evil, had been sweet to him as is the exquisite relief that comes after pain. He remembered how he had sung songs as he walked, in the ease of his heart. And now ! Shut out, a homeless wanderer, unclothed : what was that she said? unclothed : he did not know what she meant ; but the rest which he did know was enough—enough and more than enough : he was abandoned, forsaken, the door shut upon him—worse than that, open, but he unable to enter : left to himself to spend the night in the wood—or anywhere, who

cared?—though he himself was blameless now, having done nothing to deserve this doom, having felt his heart so soft and a tenderness which was more than innocence, a longing for every good in his heart. Oh the other life which he had left! the homely house, the quiet room, the face all smiling weeping, at the door!

“And that they called earth; and this they say is heaven.”

He said this aloud, unawares—and suddenly he was answered by another voice, which seemed to be near him, the voice of another man standing somewhere close by, which said, “No, you are mistaken; this is not heaven.”

The young man raised his head and looked round him; and the hair rose up upon his head, and a thrill of shrinking and terror went over him, for he saw no one. He looked round him, drawing back against the tree which crowned the bank, and clutching at it in his alarm: he was no coward, but where is the man who can be suddenly accosted by a voice while seeing no one, and not be afraid? “I must have dreamed I heard it,” he said to himself: but rose up with an impulse of agitation to leave the place in which such delusions could be.

Then he heard the voice again, but this time lower down, and now close to him, as if a man had suddenly sat down beside him upon the bank. “Are you so new?” it said, with a half laugh. “Have you not discovered that you too are invisible, like me?”

“Invisible!” The young man’s voice shook with fear and wonder, wavering as if blown out by the wind, though there was no wind.

“Be consoled,” said the other; “it is no bad life: there is no fire nor brimstone here: and there is hope for those who love hope. Let us talk: it wiles the hours away.”

While the other spoke, the young man, with a trembling in every limb, held up his hands into the air, and gazed with his eyes, first at one and then at the other—at the places where he felt them, where they ought to be. He felt every nerve thrill and every finger tremble and shake, but he saw nothing. Awe and terror seized upon him. He rushed from the bank, which sloped under his feet and made him look to his footing, and flung himself against the trunk of one of the great trees. He felt the touch of it, the roughness of the bark, the projection of the twigs here and there: but at the same time he saw it clear, standing with its feet deep in the fern and undergrowth, and no human body against it—this while he felt still the thrill and shock with which he came in contact with that great substantial thing. And he uttered a great cry, “I am then no more a man!” in a voice which rang shrill with horror and misery and dismay.

“Yes,” said the other, “you are still a man. And be consoled. In some things it is better than the old life. You have no wants and no weariness, likewise no work, no responsibility. Be consoled. The discovery is painful for a moment, but you will find companions enough. What has happened to you is no more than has happened to many other men: and we have great freedom, and society at our pleasure. There is a future before us, though it may be thousands of years away.

“A future!” cried the young man; “nay, let me die and be done with it. What manner of man are you that can look calmly on a future like this? My God, to live and live and be nothing, as I am now!”

“I am,” said the other, “just such a manner of man as you will

be to-morrow. It is a shock when you discover it first—but what then? Life is but thought. There is a great prejudice in favour of a visible body, at all events in the race from which we come. But you will perceive how little in reality it matters when you realise how many things you can do and enjoy, even with that deprivation. You might never have found it out, or not for a long time, but for my friendly aid—for it is friendly, I assure you. It breaks the illusion. You will no longer expect from those others that which they have not to give. Sit down by me, and cease measuring yourself against that tree. The tree is solid, but not you—yet there are many consolations. Sit down again, and let us talk.”

The young man stood pressing himself against the tree, his forehead against the roughness of the bark which dented the soft flesh, his arms stretched round it, not long enough to span its girth, but pricked by the little growths which incrustated it. He clung to the great trunk as if it gave him a hold upon something tangible, the only thing that remained to him. They had not seen him, then, these fair creatures, at the gate. That which they heard, that which they addressed, was only a voice. Nobody had seen him along the way. Those who said “God save you” had meant something which he did not yet understand. There was reason for the pity in their eyes and the tears which he had seen them shed. He had seen them, but not they him. He was no man, but only a voice. The horror grew into an awe which quenched the cries with which his heart was bursting. He without a faculty impaired, hearing everything, seeing everything, feeling with such intensity as he had never felt before! Yet he was

now no man, but a voice. The calamity was so great and so unlooked for, that his very voice, the thing he now was, seemed to die in his throat, and his heart in his breast: though all the time he felt his heart beating, bounding, as never in moments of the greatest emotion it had done before, and the blood coursing like a great flood through the veins that were not, and from head to foot of that human frame which existed no longer. Oh terrible doom! oh awful day!

“Come and sit by me, and let us talk,” said the other voice.

And then there came a melting and a softening over this forlorn soul. If he was thus for ever banished from common sight—if he was, indeed, exiled from home and every tender fellowship, a thing that no man or woman could ever take by the hand again—still to hear another voice was something in this awful mystery of anguish. He loosed himself from his tree, but kissed its rough bark with a kind of passion as he drew himself away. His finger had caught a sharp twig, and it hurt him; his brow was marked, he could feel it, with the scales of the bark. This gave him a little comfort in his desolation. And then there was still the Voice. He came back and threw himself upon the flowery bank, which sent forth its wild fragrance suddenly as he pressed it, as it might have done if— This also gave him a little consolation, as if it were a verification of the being which he felt in every pulse and every limb.

“You were saying,” said the other, “that this was called heaven.”

“Ah, no!” said the young man with a voice of despair. “I see my mistake. It is rather—”

“Do not make any more mistakes,” said the other, quickly.

"It is neither one nor the other. It is the land of Suspense, where we all are until a day which no one knows—a visionary day which, perhaps, may never come, seeing it has been threatened and delayed for all the ages. Ah! you cannot imagine the worlds-full there are of us! and some of the great Romans tell you that the tradition was in their time as now."

"The Day of Judgment!" said the young man, very low.

"Well! that is what they say. But in the meantime, not to discourage you, it is better here than life was before. There are few pleasures—those things that one despised one's self for enjoying, when time was. But the mind is free—and there are a thousand things to learn. And there is society everywhere. We are here in multitudes. There are almost more of us, I believe, than of—those others."

"Those others!" repeated the young man—he looked up where through the thick foliage there was a glimpse of the towers and roof-trees of that home which he could not enter. His companion spoke as if they were enemies: but his own spirit rebelled against that thought.

"The good people," said the voice, as with a sneer. "What made them to differ, do you ask? Oh, they made their preparations. While we led *joyeuse vie* and had

no thought for to-morrow, they took their measures. I am not sure that those who have passed by the Temple in the wood have the best of it even now; but at least we have not much to complain of. There is no suffering: we are left to ourselves: we go where we will, and have great facilities: and, as I tell you, the best of company. Only make up your mind to the one loss, and we have really much to congratulate ourselves upon."

The young man made no reply: he began to hate this voice, with its evenness of speech, the calm and the encouragement of its tone. He had known men who spoke so, who were content to live, though life had no hope, with a sneer at those who were other than they. And though a moment ago he had been almost glad to turn to another being deprived and naked like himself, he felt now that if he were but alone, it would be more easy to bear. The Voice went on talking to him with the pleasure of one who has found a new hearer. And sometimes he listened, and sometimes heard it as though he heard it not. Sometimes even it caught him with an ingenious word and made him laugh; but then his mind would stiffen into silence, and the horror and gloom swept over him again like the dark waves over a wreck at sea.

III.

All the night long he sat there leaning his head upon his hands, sometimes leaning against the great trunk of the tree behind him, which gave him a sensation of forlorn comfort, the only thing that recognised him as still tangible, a thing of flesh and blood. He sat there amid all the fragrant breathing of the night as in the

lap of a mother who cooled his forehead with dewy touches, and subdued his soul into the calm of inanimate things. And yet there was nothing inanimate in this great realm of nature where the air was fresh and free, like the air upon a mountain-top where there is no wind but only a sense of being far above all hindrance

or soil, and near to heaven. The sky above was alive with stars, stars that were something more than stars, that had rounded and expanded into orbs of light and seemed almost within reach, as if there might be means of entering them and knowing their secrets. The light that came from them was enough to make everything visible in a tender and soft radiance where every variety of shade had its own transparency and sweetness of lovely meaning—such a light as never was on sea or shore. Through the openings of the trees he could see far off the whole course of the valley clear in that mystic glow which was without colour, where all was clear as in a vision, unlike the brightness of the day. The towers and pinnacles rose up on his right hand over the trees as if made of silver: the little floating vapours in the sky, the great pulsing and movement of the worlds of light above, the air which was as a rapture of purity and freedom,—all conveyed to the young man's bosom the sensation of boundless space, and a lofty height beyond the thoughts of men. And there was a subdued glow along the edge of the horizon, as if there it passed into pure light as the stars did round their boundaries, hiding the life within.

Sometimes this young man had felt even upon the homely earth something of that movement that is in the spheres, the swaying of the great planet as it ran its course in the heavens; but here it seemed like a faint stir of life in everything, a subtle and all-pervading current, a movement majestic, almost visible, in rhythm and measure, like God Himself proceeding onward always in His supernal way. After a time, when the beating of the river of life in his own ears, the throbbing of his

heart and current of his blood, were calmed by this greater movement and mystery, he gazed abroad upon the majestic night with a hush of reverence and of awe in which there was adoration. He was silent while God passed by, and felt the sweep of the great stars following in His train, and the air upon his face, the breath of their going, and the thrill of that vast procession through illimitable skies. He, a spirit, though not blessed, yet as a spirit recognised the great course of innumerable worlds and circles of being, following the mighty footsteps of their King.

Thus one moment of amazed and trembling revelation gave him rest in the glory of the night, and stilled the lesser voices and murmurs that filled his ears: but as a man is after all the centre of all systems to himself, the tide of thought and feeling rolled back, and with it the despair which the knowledge of his own condition had brought upon him. When his eyes came back to his immediate surroundings, the sudden sight of the green mound on which he sat, with all its undergrowth of moss and starry decoration of minute flowers, vacant under the faint light, as if there was no one there, drove his soul almost to madness in the sudden rediscovery. He felt the soft knots of the grass and cushion of the moss under him, yet when he looked there was nothing there. He grasped it with his hands and found it empty, though the moss seemed to yield and the blades of grass to bend under his weight. It was like madness rising up into his brain, and he felt with a mingling of ideas distraught that he must spring to his feet and rush forth after God upon His awful way, crying to Him, entreating, blaspheming, forcing His attention,

though it was through that incomprehensible whirl of space, and threading the unseen path from star to star.

But that wild impulse, like others, died away. A man, be he ever so rebellious, learns to know that the impossible hedges all his steps: and he sank back upon his tree, suppressing himself, binding himself into the submission which he knew at the bottom of his heart was his only hope. He felt no fatigue, notwithstanding his long journey and the dreadful disappointment at the end. None of those imperious needs of the flesh which fill up so much of the time and distract so many of the thoughts of earth, moved him at all. He was free from everything, weariness and pain, and food and sleep and shelter. No thought of these things filled his mind. He did not even remark his exemption, so natural it seemed. He knew only the impossibility that girded him round and round. He could not change the condition he had come to. No one could change it. Such as it was he had to endure it, to find the reason for it, to discover the compensation. To go mad, and dash his head against the confines of the world, and force a reversal from God of his sentence was impossible. Ah! he fell low again, with his face hidden in the softly rustling grass. The impossible girt him round with its circle of iron. Rebel, submit, content himself, go mad—these were all things that could be done. But reverse God's sentence, no! not if he had the strength of giants, not if he had the power of the whole world, upon a little sod of whose surface his wounded spirit lay.

Presently he had controlled himself, and was sitting again with his back against his tree and his head leaning on his hands, gazing out upon the night yet seeing nothing.

And as he sat there all his life rolled out before him like a long panorama—his little life with all its broken scenes, of which he had never known the meaning. Often he had thought they had no meaning, as certainly they had no intention, no plan, but only a foolish impulse, a touch from some one here and there, who had pushed him unthinking to one side or another—not the straight way. What a succession of accidents it was to end in this! no purpose in it—no meaning: all a foolish rush here or there haphazard, the affair of a moment, although fate had taken up the changeful threads and woven it into certainty for ever. He saw himself a boy, hesitating with one foot on the upper slope, drawn back by errant fancy, by curiosity, by accident—always by accident!—then, finding the lower road the easier, the higher hard to begin, putting off till to-morrow and to-morrow—but no meaning in it, oh, no purpose, no settled plan of rebellion, no intention to offend. He went over this again and again, till he felt himself a deeply injured man. Never had he meant any harm: he had even tried not to hurt any one else while he took his own pleasure, and he remembered the words that had been in the air following him wherever he went—nobody's enemy but his own. That was true, that was true! He had not tempted any one, nor ever defied God, whom he never doubted, for whose name, had there been need for that, he felt that he could have died rather than have been apostate to it. The tears came into his eyes with this thought. He had been wrong, very wrong: he had always known that, and hated it—yet done the same again: but never with any blasphemous meaning, never defying God, always knowing that the other way was the best, and

hoping one day when his hour of pleasure was over — And what had he not paid already for his folly!—of all that he might have done in the other life, he had done nothing; of all that he might have attained, nothing. He had wrought no deliverance in the earth. It was all loss, loss, miserable failure: and hearts breaking, his own as well as the rest. But no purpose in it. He had never intended any day of his disobedience, from first to last, to deny his Maker or insult Him. Never, never! It was the one thing he was certain of amid all the doubts and changes, all the confusions in his life.

And, perhaps, this was how it happened, that when he had set out on his journey that morning—was it still the same morning, not twenty-four hours off, the morning of yesterday?—his heart had been so light. He had anticipated nothing but good. He had made sure that all the links of his old habits would be broken, that he would be lifted without effort of his to a better sphere. He had not said this to himself in words, nor, indeed, was he clear in his mind that he expected anything definite, or what it was he expected—but only something good, happiness that would bring back all that he had missed in the time that was past. Of one thing he had been very sure, that he would not err again: he had thought of the ways of men, so vain and melancholy, with a great relief in being done with them. And too glad and thankful he would have been to be done with them! to take his place in the home where he believed he was going, and his share of all the duty there, whatever it might be. But now—no home, no duty, no life for him. He was nothing — no man, a Voice, and no more.

How many times, in what an infinity of time and leisure, did he go over these thoughts! The night stole on, all glorious in quiet and repose—some of the wondrous lights above gliding out of sight as the world in which he was ascended and descended, going down into the night, and then with a half-sensible turn and thrill turning round to the day—and some came up into sight in the great round of the firmament that had been unseen before. Then a thrill ran through the wood, and voices began to awaken in the trees—little tongues of birds twittering, wakest thou, sleepest thou!—among the branches, before all their little world was roused and the great hymn began. The young man had not been prepared for that hymn, and it took him strangely in a surprise and passion of sympathy: he said to himself that he had not known there were birds here, and the moisture came to his eyes. Then he tried to join with a note of his man's voice and startled them all, till he saw his mistake and tried instead a low and soft whistle, which they took for the note of a new comrade and burst forth again. The young man felt his spirit all subdued by that morning hymn, and tried to say his prayers in a great confusion, stammering, not knowing what words to use. The old prayers seemed so out of place. And then he remembered what all the people had said to him — God save you! — and repeated it with a faltering and a trembling — God save me! God save me! Not "give me this day my daily bread." Was that old-fashioned? out of date? He trembled, and all his strength seemed to melt like water, and he said only, God save me! God save me! not knowing what he said.

All these strange emotions filled

the time and the world about him, yet was his mind free to note the growth of the morning, coming fresh as it seemed out of the hand of God: the great valley came slowly to life and to the light, and the silence filled with sound as water wells up in a fountain. As for himself, he did not stir, but watched, not now despairing, nor even questioning, but still: a spectator wondering and looking on, hushed to the bottom of his heart, to see what all things did, having for himself no duty, no work; and feeling, so far as he felt at all, a nothingness, as if he were part of the mound on which he lay, where he fancied vaguely the grasses had begun already to grow over him. What would they do, they who were other than he, they to whom everything belonged, though to him nothing belonged? He watched what they would do, what the morning would bring to them, with much eagerness in his heart; but the thickness of the trees and the brushwood, which was very close in that direction, shut out his view. And perhaps his curiosity was not so great as he thought, for his mind filled with many thoughts which revolved about himself, and presently he forgot all that was around him, and became, still a spectator indeed, but a spectator of his own being, and of those things which were going on in it. And it seemed now that the thing most natural to him, who now possessed nothing of his own, was to go back upon the time when he possessed so much, love and companionship, and hope and the power of doing, and pleasure of every kind. His heart had grown sick of that life before he left it, and he had often felt it empty of everything, and that all was vanity. But now his heart returned to it, longing and wonder-

ing how he should ever have been so weary. Then he had been a man, but now was nothing, a Voice only, no more. And when he remembered how, in the smallest thing as in the greatest, he had chosen and taken his own way, and had pleasure in his will and independence, and had done this and that because he pleased, with no other reason for it, and that now there was nothing for him to choose, nothing to do—himself nothing, and all his ways nothing, a straw blown upon the wind! In the other life there had been threatenings of punishment and torture, but never of this—and he thought to himself, though with a shiver, that the fire and the burning would have been more easy to bear, and perhaps a fierce encounter with the devils who tormented lost souls—a rising up against them, and call for justice out of the pit. To fight, to struggle, to resist, these fierce joys seemed to attract him, to revive his heart. But here there was nothing—neither good nor evil, neither use nor destruction. The Power which he had offended despised him, would not lay a finger on him, left him to rot and perish. No! worse by far than that, to go on in nothingness for ever and ever, to be and not to be, at one and the same time—

As these thoughts began to quicken and whirl through his brain—for though he began in quiet they gradually gained velocity and strength, till the rush was like the blazing of fire or the sweep of water in a flood, consuming and carrying him away—he became aware of an external sound which drove them away at once like a flight of birds careering out of sight. And looking up whence the sound came, he saw a movement as of some one searching amid the

brushwood, and presently the thick branches were pushed aside and a face suddenly appeared, looking in to the opening in which the young man sat. It was a face which awakened in him at first a great throb of loving and kindness, being a countenance he had longed for for many a day, thinking that had it shone upon him on earth it might have saved him from all his follies : but along with this there came a rush of resentment into his mind which checked the cry of "Father!" which had come to his lips. And he sat unmoving, allowing those eyes to search through the shade, though he knew that till he spoke he could never be found. It gave him a kind of angry pleasure to see the curves of anxiety round them, the eagerness of the look. Ah, he was sorry ! but what was that when he had shut his door, when he had made no effort to bring the wanderer in. "My mother," said the young man, "would have been different : never would she have rested and left me outside ;" but then there struck him like an arrow the thought of many moments in the past when he had said to himself, "If my father had been here !"

The other figure stood wistfully under the shadow of the tree—a man not old, full of the dignity and strength of life—like one who knew much and had seen much, and whose hands were full of serious affairs. You might have been sure that he had left for a moment many things that called for his care to come here on this quest. His eyes were clear, shining with truth and justice and honour. Such eyes shine like stars even in the earth, and the eyes of the helpless understand and the poor cry to them. Nothing could disturb the heavenly quiet in them, the look of a soul at peace ; but the curves of the eyelids were troubled, and the

strain of anxious love was in his face. After a moment he said, the softness of his voice seeming to search through the silence as his eyes searched through the void, "My son ! are you here, my son ?"

The young man still paused a little, unwilling to relieve the other, yet not willing to lose the pleasure of revealing like a reproach his own abandoned state. "I am here," at last he said.

The father pushed through the trees and came to him quickly, and once more there came into the young man's mind the story of him who saw his son a long way off, and ran and fell upon his neck. Had he himself been as of old, this was what his father would have done—but how can a man embrace a voice ? Yet the movement melted him, and made him rise to his feet to meet the other, though still with that unreasoning resentment in his mind, as though the door had been shut upon him, which was not shut, though he was unable to cross the threshold. There was authority and command, as of one used to rule, in the face of this man who was his father : but everything else was veiled with the great pity and love that was in his voice. "It was not thus we hoped to welcome you, my son, my son !" he cried, coming near, with his arms stretched out.

"How is it," cried the young man, "that I feel all my members from head to foot, and every faculty, and yet you see me not, touch me not ? It makes a man mad to be, and yet not to be."

"God save you !" said the father, with tears. "God aid you ! We know not how it is—nor can we do anything to help. It is for your purification, and because that which is must have its natural accomplishment. The sins of the flesh destroy the flesh, as is just.

But you, you are still able to love, to think, to adore your God in His works. My son, accept and submit—and the better day will come.”

“Submit! to be nothing!” said the young man. And then he cried bitterly, “Have I any choice? It is stronger than I am. I must submit, since you will not help, nor any one. If my mother——” and here his voice broke. It was not that his mind felt all the bitterness with which he spoke: and he knew that no one could help him: yet having in him still all the humanness of a child, it gave him pleasure to wound one who might have helped him had things been otherwise, and to prove that he was abandoned and forsaken, he who hitherto had always been helped and forgiven. He looked for reproof, but none came. His father, standing so near him, looking at him with such tender pity, said nothing but “My son!” and as these two words, whether from the Most High God or from the faltering lips of a man, enclose all of love that words can carry, what was there more that could be said?

“My son,” he said, “it is not permitted here that we should discuss or that we should justify the ways of our God. Though you cry out against them, you know that they are just and very merciful, punishing not, but permitting that this which must be, should be accomplished in you. Yet not without hope. All that is of the spirit is yours as before. You can judge, you can understand, you can know. And above all you can love. What is greater than the mind and the heart? You are but naked of this frame, this body which is beloved and blessed because it is as the body of the Lord. But even for this not without hope. My child, the day will come when you will not think only of yourself.

You will begin to think of Him who for us lived and died and lived again, and is for ever and ever. You will not consent to wipe out His name, but stand for Him among your fellows. And other things that are not you will fill your heart——”

“That are not me!—but who is so miserable as I?” cried the young man, covering his face with his hands.

The father paused for pity, looking at him with eyes that were full of tears. “It has not been given to you, oh my son,” he said, “to pass by the Temple in the wood: yet still it may be. Heretofore you have done what you would, but not here: for here the will of God reigns alone, and man can contradict it no more. Yet from time to time,” he said, “from time to time there is in this great Land of Suspense, as in all the worlds where the myriads of our brethren dwell, a day of grace, when the Lord Himself passes through. As he goes to visit the spheres of His dominions there is no place where He does not pass through, and hears every cry and heals every soul that comes to Him. Beloved be His name! Blessing and love breathe round about Him, and no one whom it touches can withstand that holy breath.”

The young man looked up, and for a moment it seemed that the eyes of the heavenly man and of the spirit met, and that he who was in the body, that house of God not made with hands, saw him who was out of the body: for the eyes of the son were full of tears like those of the father, and he said with a broken voice, “So I have always been taught to think of Him. I am no stranger, my father, my father! I have sinned but yet I am of His house.”

“God bless thee, my son,” the father said.

IV.

After this there came weary mornings and evenings, or what he felt to be such, taking no account of them, yet rousing ever from his thoughts to feel the glory of the day and the sweetness of the night ; for neither tempest nor trouble was there, and the other great worlds that are visible in the dark, rolling along their course in the world of space, became as the houses of friends opening their doors, showing ever another and another world of men, some like *those others*, white men and shining, some in hosts of vague faces like the shadow of crowds which he knew to be as himself : and the sensation of all those multitudes about who peopled what we call the sky, multitudes more than could be numbered, being all those who had lived and died on the earth since its wonderful story began, silenced and soothed him as we are soothed to know that others are as we are, treading the same path. Many things were there which he could not understand. Sometimes it appeared to him that he could see the signs of great commotion in one of those neighbouring worlds, and shouting afar off, which came but as a murmur to his ears ; and once it seemed to him that he saw a great procession coming forth, as if the King were making a visitation from one star to another, and a great shining bridge of light was thrown from planet to planet, by which He went and came.

It was a long time, however, before he saw that passing through of which his father had told him. Yet one day, in the rising of the morning, a note as of a silver bugle suddenly penetrated the spheres, and everything stirred with expectation, the very air and the birds in the trees, and every-

thing that had life. He himself, drawn he could not tell how, almost against his will, by something that overmastered him, that made his breath come quick and his heart beat, hastened to the hill behind the wood, and placed himself on the highest point, where he could see all that went on below. Fain would his feet have gone farther, fain would they have carried him to the level of the valley which he could see stretching far to the east and to the west : for already he saw the first of the great procession appearing, and all the inhabitants of the town which should have been his home pouring forth in bands, in glistening garments, with flowers and palms to strew upon the path of Him that was coming. The young man knew who it was that was coming, and his heart seemed to go forth out of his breast towards that great Traveller ; but there was something in him that held back, and that made him cover his face in an anguish of shame. For who was he that he should dare to look upon the Lord as He passed, blessing all men upon His way ? Something came floating up to him upon the air like a waft of blessing : was it a call to him—the sound of his name ? He knew not, but dug his hands into the roots of the grass, and dared not to lift up his eyes. And in the meantime the great procession went on, while his heart, as it were, contended with him and cried, moaning and foaming and struggling, that he should go, while still he kept back ashamed, asking himself how he dared to look the Lord in the face, or hear Him blessing the people, and find there was no word for him ? There he lay, feeling every member of his frame contend with

him to get to the feet of the Lord, yet he holding back: until all the wonderful marching of the train had passed along and become but an indistinct radiance upon the way, when he lifted his eyes and looked after them, and broke into a great weeping, thinking that still he saw One in the midst like none whom he had ever seen before, One to whom his heart went out, and whom he would have given heaven and earth to follow. But the moment was over, and he could now follow no more.

This happened but once, and it may not be supposed that he spent all the endless time he had at his disposal in so agitating a way. By moments these thoughts came upon him and possessed him: yet seldom, for he was seldom alone, his fellow-inhabitants, both of one side and the other, coming to him continually and occupying him with other plans and ideas. Many visitors he had from the town upon the hill, the dwelling of his kindred: but time fails us to tell of these, and all the tender words they said, and their pity and their love. Sometimes he would speak with them — sometimes, if other things were in his mind, would make no response nor let them know where to find him, preferring the society of those who were as himself, and were with him always, sometimes one, sometimes many, talking and making expeditions here and there. They led him to many wonderful places, and showed him great sights, and many mysteries of the spheres became visible to him, and knowledge not permitted to earth, so that he could now solve many questions and find them simple, which, in the days of his former life, he could remember to have thought upon with awe as things that it was impossible to fathom. Thus he became wise, and more

learned than the sages of the former world, and found a certain pleasure in these things which he learned and saw.

And it soon became apparent to him that many of his new companions held the belief that it was they who were the fortunate ones, being disencumbered of all hindrances and cares, with no duty or responsibility, but free to follow their pleasure, to go where they pleased, to enjoy knowledge and science and all the pleasures of the mind. There were some indeed who were like himself, and would not be comforted because of being no longer men but only voices, without identity, without substance, and incapable of uniting themselves to each other save with the loosest ties. They were not brethren for joy and for sorrow, for neither was there: they could not stand by each other, or pledge themselves to be true friends for death and life, for of that there was no need. They were but acquaintances, each lost in the invisible when they parted, walking and talking together as long as each pleased the other, with no fellowship of mutual labour, or the sharing of work trouble. Wherever one voice accosted another there was acquaintance, but nothing that went further; for they had no mutual hopes or fears or anything to link them more closely together.

And many of those who had been long in this condition had made a belief for themselves, and tried to teach it to the new-comers, that this was the perfect life; for was not all freedom among them, no bondage, not even that of staying in one place, or confining yourself to one kind of associates, no pain, no limitations, but each free to learn all he could, to perfect his genius, to increase his knowledge? Was not this enough

for any soul? And some of them scoffed at the idea of any reckoning yet to come, pointing out the unreasonableness of it, the impossibility of even recollecting, far less answering for, the events which had happened perhaps hundreds of years before, during the short time when one inhabited that foolish body, by some thought a disgusting thing, "a collection of sewers." And if there was no great day to come, which the very oldest spirits said had been threatened thousands of years since in their recollection and had never come to anything, what came of the equally old and foolish traditions of a divine personage ruling over all? As for the men who lived in all those villages and towns, who thought they were better than their neighbours, whom with their restricted faculties they could not see, what were they but labourers still, with work and responsibilities upon them,—how much less happy than they who went free!

There were many, however, who were very uneasy when such conversation as this prevailed, and of these was the young man, whose thoughts were very fluctuating in respect to himself, but never on this point. "If you had seen, as I did," he would say, "the procession pass; and felt the heart tear out of you to go and fling itself at His feet." The elders laughed at such words, and bade him wait till he had seen it a hundred times, and without any feeling at all: but the others made a pause which betrayed some uneasy thoughts, and secretly were glad that they could not see each other's faces or betray the strange response in their own minds to what he said. One voice, a little tremulous, spoke, and said that these things which he called body and heart were an illusion, a distorted recollection of the chrysalis

state in which their consciousness began; and another, that the body which had been mentioned was like a dog, and faithful, in its brutal way, to what it had been taught. They were all together, that company of wandering souls, in a great tower which stood upon the extreme edge of the world in which they dwelt, and which was built upon the rock, standing out into the illimitable world of space as into the sea, with precipices immeasurable sinking down below, lower than thought could reach, while the great tower rose higher than thought, swung upon that giddy edge, and, though built of indestructible rock, quivering in the great sweep of the atmosphere more tremendous than on the highest mountain-top. There were all the secrets of the celestial world revealed, and all the movements of the stars, and the workings of the planetary system, and all the wonderful apparatus by which they were observed and noted. And many men of the other kind were in that place, were at work and busy, whose duty it was to watch over the balance and the trim of all these blazing worlds, and to see that each kept in its orbit, and all its attendant stars in their places, that there might be no wavering in the march of the heavens.

The wanderers went and came, through all these wonderful sights, and no one noted their coming and their going: for all the others were busy with their work and occupation, never slackening in their watch. And the young man, and some of his younger companions with him, looked upon them with envy, longing, but in vain, for some part or lot in the matter, and not to be thus unseen and without use in the great universe which seemed to go on without them though enclosing them in its great and mystic round. And as they gazed out from

that watch-tower one of the others pointed to a little darkling planet hanging upon the skirts of space, half seen amid the glory of the greater stars. "That speck," he said, "is what we called the Earth, and bragged of as something great and wonderful in our time. Look at it, contemptible! dim with smokes and fogs, and the breath of toiling men."

"Yet it was our mother," said the young man, "and there we lived, and there we died."

"If you call that, the throes of the birth-hour, living: and the journey hither dying—trifling incidents of our career." It was the same voice which had first accosted him when he arrived in that world which now spoke, and there were many with him, the elder spirits: while with the young man were many of the new-comers, still sore and wounded to feel themselves dropped out of everything, and humbled to feel that they were but voices, and no longer men and women as of old. And they turned with the young man as he stretched out his arms, leaning on the parapet, unto the wide and whirling world of space.

"Oh little earth!" he said, "full of vapour and smoke and the thoughts of men, rising up to heaven. At least we were something then, not nothing: and dear Love was there, and all the hopes of God."

"Why not now also—why not now?" said something, that was but a tremble and a quiver by his side. "Because," said the elder spirit, "we need not these ancient visions. Free souls are we in the world of thought, despising all that is below, knowing nothing that is above. What do ye murmur at, ye crew? What would ye have, insatiate souls? The universe is ours to admire and to enjoy. We go where we will, we

live as we will. You want these phalansteries, these houses on the hills! prisons and bondage. What need ye, beyond what we have?"

The young man leaned over, the great wind playing with him, as if it subdued its force not to carry away this light and petty scrap of being. And stretching out his hands, he said, "What we want—it is God and Love."

This he said, not so much out of his own heart, as because there was something of that in him which poets have. And being so, he knew that it was true. And the spirits round him murmured and sobbed and repeated, "God and Love." And the others were silent and said no word.

He went back afterwards to his living place in the wood, which he had come to love because it was near the home of those who were his; and a number of those wanderers went with him, talking of what he had said and of what was in their hearts. "We thought it was here we should have found Him," they said; "we thought that to come hither was all that was wanted. Tell us, thou! has He failed? We were never His servants, yet we believed that He would save us at the end."

"This is not the end—it is but the beginning," the young man said.

"And will He save us, will He save us—at the end?" The voices all together were like a blast of weeping wind.

Then the young man turned upon them and cried, "What are we? what are we? Let us perish if He will, but He be all in all!"

This he said because of something that had come into him he knew not how: he felt it and obeyed its impulse, but knew not why. For still the first thing in his own heart, as in theirs, was to be saved—to be once more a man in His image, and no longer a

wandering ghost unclothed. To be and to be seen of his fellows, and to speak with other men—even if it should bring pain and sorrow; for sorrow and pain are higher things than to be nothing, though at your ease and free as the wind.

He sat all that night through on his favourite mound, thinking and pondering within himself; and as he thought of all he had seen and the great Universe that had opened upon him at the height of that watch-tower, the wondrous circle of the stars, and all the mysteries of being which hung upon His breath who made them, he began to understand what he himself had said, and his eyes grew wet as when he had seen the Lord pass and his heart had fought with him to get free to fling itself in the Master's path. He had held it back then, but not now. He looked up to the skies above him, and saw those glorious worlds

for ever moving in that sublime circle around the unseen throne; and this world in which he was swaying softly turning toward the highest Light. And he said to himself what one had said thousands of years ago—a shepherd-boy under the starry heavens—"What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" And it seemed to him that he himself, about whom he had been spending so many thoughts, murmuring because of his losses, and convulsing all the quiet wood with longings after another state—he himself, who had been the centre of the world to him, was indeed nothing, no more than a drop of dew or a blade of grass in the great Universe of God. And he cried out, but softly, to the One that hears all things, "Be Thou! for ever and ever! and let me be nothing, for nothing I am. But Thou, be Thou, supreme and all in all!"

v.

In the glory of the morning the young man awoke, for even in the solemnity of his act, giving up everything, even hope if the Lord so willed, he had been surprised by that human sweetness of sleep which was not necessary to his state of being, yet delightful as the dew when it came, refreshing the soul. There was never anything but fair weather in that world, yet it seemed to him when he opened his eyes that no day had ever been so fair as this; and he asked himself, Was it perhaps Easter or some great holiday, of which he had lost count in the passing of the years and the days? Everything shone and glistened and sent forth breathings of delight under the shining of the sun, and the whole world was gay, and every drop of dew was like another perfect world of joy and blessing.

He could not rest where he was on so happy a morning, but went forth and visited all the wood, as one visits one's friends when there is a great rejoicing to see that they are rejoicing too.

At last he found himself upon that pleasant knoll from which he could see the whole valley lying in a rapture under the joyful light; and he saw that there was much movement in the town near him, and once more faces at all the windows, and white figures looking over the parapet of the ascent where he had gone up, but had not been admitted. They were looking then for some one, some one who would be of his kindred; and it would be an event for him as well as for them, and perhaps even he would gain something—a companion, a friend. But he stopped these thoughts

while they were in his mind, and tried to think what it would be to him if the new-comer was received where he had not been received, and came as a man in the body which God gave—to be among the others, not banished into nothingness. For a long time he was in doubt, for no one came up the ascending path except those whom he knew, whose business it was, and he looked in vain for a stranger; and there began to rise in his heart a half hope half fear that he for whom they were all looking should come as he himself had done—invisible: a voice only, and no man.

But lo! while he watched there came forth from the silver line of the great highway a single figure, of one who sang as he came—not in haste, but almost slowly, standing still and looking round him from time to time, as if the beauty of the world was so sweet to him that he could not go on, then turning his face towards the town and proceeding upon his way. The young man put out his hands, and suddenly clasped them together, and gazed in a suspense upon which his whole being seemed to hang. It was he, it was he! He had known the outline against the light while it was still but a shadow; he had recognised every footstep, and the turn of the head, and every line and every movement. Oh, how easy to know those who are one's own, however far off!—the familiar gesture, the little movement that is nothing, that a stranger would never see. He sprang up to rush down the hill and meet him, calling his name, and reflecting that even those at the gate, though they were there to welcome him, could not know him as he did. But his feet were as rooted to the soil, and he sank down again with a sob in his bosom, and a strong pang that seemed to rend him in twain.

Not for him, not for him, was this delight, to meet his brother and fall upon his neck, and ask a thousand things of home! To look on was all that was permitted to him. Why should he go, who was nothing, who could not take his hand, or show his face where those were who were the people of the Lord? He sank down upon his knoll, and covered his face with his hands, and heard the tumult of glad voices, and the welcomes and shouts of joy with which the wayfarer was taken in. He listened to every word, while the voices streamed up the steep ascent and the stranger was brought with rejoicing to his father's house. Was he glad too? Was there a pang in his heart, thinking that these welcomes had been prepared for him too, till it was discovered what he was? His voice, which was all he had, seemed choked in his throat. He could not speak, he could not cry. Vanity of vanities, nothing of nothingness! even his voice went from him, and he was no more than a thought.

Thus it was that he did not see, because he could not look: but heard every sound and the footsteps on the stones, and the shouts from above and the songs below. When they died away he felt in the bitterness of his heart as if he had been again shut out, as if it had been the day of his first refusal; but, more bitter still, shut out, and for ever shut out, and never again to hold converse with his kin and rejoice with them. For what should he rejoice? That he was shut out, and that the open gates were barred against him, and only him? But at least they might have let him share the joy that his brother had come and was more happy than he. He sprang up and turned away, still covering his face, that he might not see those walls and towers

into the heart of which the joy of welcome had swept, and were now but faintly heard—and went quickly away and hid himself in the heart of the wood: not in his accustomed place,—partly because his heart was sick of all that lived and breathed about him, and partly in perversity, that they might not find him when they came to search for him, as he knew they were sure to do. Ah! why was this? why was this, that an event which was so joyful should throw him back, back into the abyss from which his soul had escaped? He had escaped from himself; he had consented to be nothing, and to know that he was nothing—that it was not for him that heaven and earth should be disturbed, as if an atom was to make so much commotion for its own wellbeing; but now this atom once again blotted out both God and Heaven.

He struggled manfully in his heart to come to an end. "I know," he said to himself, "that it was not fit that I who had sinned should be rewarded. I have come to little harm. I suffer nothing. I have the whole world left, more beautiful than heart had conceived. And once in a thousand years the Lord will pass by, and I shall see Him, even if it be no more. And they will all come to comfort me and talk to me, and not forget me—and my brother——" But he did not say my brother. He said a name; and at the sound of that name a great sobbing seized him, and the recollection of so many things that were past, and the home that

never had been closed against him, and the love that had been his all his life. And then there came upon him suddenly another thought, at the coming of which his heart stood still, and strained upon all its chords as if it would sink away from him: and he fell upon his knees and lifted up his head and cried with an awful cry, "God! the mother, the mother!" And the far distant earth seemed to roll up under his vision and open, and show a house desolate and a woman who sat within. And he who was himself desolate, yet within sight of the joy, forgot himself and everything that was his, to think of her. The mother, the mother! he flung himself on his face, he rose again to his feet, he stood and held out his hands to God, calling to him and repeating His name, "God! God!" and then "Father!" if, perhaps, that might reach him better. "For now she is alone," he cried. And then in his trouble he reproached the Most High God, and cried out, "Thou art not alone; Thou hast Thy Son." And he forgot all his trouble and complaining, and became all one prayer, one cry for another, for one who was desolate and had now no child.

Then straight like an arrow from a bow he went away, leaving his wood and the home of his kindred, and the valley, hastening he knew not where. For in his heart he felt that there must be some way, some place in which he could reach the footstool of the great Father, and pray to be forgotten and blotted out for ever, rather than that she should be left to weep alone.

VI.

It was close to one of those great bridges by which the Lord passed to the other worlds around,—a bridge that rose light as the sea-

foam, built of white marble and of alabaster, and every line marked with fine gold, which sometimes shone as if with jewels, and some-

times seemed to melt away in the clouds as if it had not been; but whether it was built of the stones of the earth, or whether of vapours and cloud, flung itself boldly across the abyss, and bore the army and the attendants of the Lord whenever He came. And near to this place, where the broad highway seemed itself to march and continue along the bridge, there was a cathedral in the wood. The young man had heard of it from many. It was by this great temple that those others passed who preserved their being as men: and those who were but Voices moaned and lamented often, saying that they had missed the way. But it was not for this, nor indeed knowingly at all, that the young man made his way here: but only in the height of his anguish, that he might find some holy place where God might listen to his cry.

The day had come towards its end, and the glory of the sunset lit up the white and glorious bridge which spanned the air and clouds, and disappeared into a mystery of the unseen such as no eyes of man could penetrate or trace, to the other side. The young man did not pause to look at this wonder of the world, but turned aside to the temple in the wood. His footsteps were drawn towards it, he scarcely knew how: but until he saw it he knew not that this was that Temple of which he had heard. But of that great cathedral what tongue can tell? for it was not built by hands, nor were its arches created and its pillars put into their place by any workman, whether mortal or immortal; for where it stood it grew with its feet in the living soil, and every column a living tree straight and noble, and the vault above woven of foliage, which changed and moved with every breath, and let in the changings of the light,

living too, and moving ceaselessly from east to west through all the brilliant hours of the day; and during the night a great vision of stars was in the place where the lights should be, like silver lamps upon the altar, and in the lofty fragrant roof, where the leaves trembled and glistened: and its floor was made of living flowers throwing up their fragrance, which was sweeter than incense: and day by day it lived and grew, pushing higher and higher towards the skies, straight and tall and strong, reaching upward like the living thing it was. The sunset was still upon the western front, and streaming upon the great doorway, which was ever open, and wreathed in every climbing thing that blows, the long branches clinging one to another to find a place, and the flowers thickening and clustering upon the holy arch in an eagerness to be there: and there was a sound within of noble music and choirs unseen, which sang their hymns of praise to God both through the night and in the day.

The young man went in without a pause, thinking neither of the beautiful place nor of the strangeness of it, but only that it was the temple not made with hands, where the Lord loved to pause on his journey, and where the great Father came to commune with His Son, and which the ever-living Spirit had chosen for a place to dwell in: although not in this place or any other was that great Presence bound, but might be called upon by every path, and even in the common highroad where all men went to and fro. The young man did not remember except in a confusion what it was he had heard of the cathedral in the wood, nor knew he why he came, except with a thought that it was

the holiest place; and now there was no thought in his mind but only one, to call upon every Holy name,—that of the Father, who surely knew if there was any knowledge, what love was in the heart of a mother: and of the Son, who knew what sorrow was, and to be forsaken, above all men that ever lived: and of Him whose name was the Comforter. He flung himself upon the floor, and in the great silence—for the music rolled away and was heard no more when he came in—called and called upon these Holy names. “You who are together,” he cried, “leave not her alone!” And in the anguish of his prayer he was bold, and reminded the Lord that this was the image He had chosen of a love that never failed. “Can a woman forget her child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb.” And should He above, who knows best, He who loves most, leave the woman to be alone, alone!

Presently words failed him, and he only knew that he held her as it seemed up in his arms to God. And slowly the living day died out of the cathedral in the wood, and the living night came in and shone through the tracery of the vault above, and the stars in their places lit up the living walls, and everything breathed a silent worship up to the heavens, the flowers with their odours and the leaves with their greenness: and every noble tree stood up and called upon the name of the Lord. And the swallow and the sparrow, God's little children, and many a singing bird weary with the joy and the song of day, nestled among the branches and went to sleep in His care. And over the young man there came a great calm instead of the anguish of that prayer, and as the soft hours stole on to midnight, and the great

stillness wrapt him round and round, fatigue and peace stole over him, and he fell asleep in the middle of his prayer among the flowers.

There were those about who were coming and going for ever, faint with longing and desire to enter the Temple of the wood. But as in that world there are no bolts and bars, but only an unseen bond upon the feet and upon the heart of a man, so that he cannot go where he would until it is his hour—all that these longing souls could do was to linger and gaze and await the moment when they might enter. And many were always gathered about the door, gazing in where they so fain would be. And they saw the young man lying upon the flowers, and wondered at him that he should sleep in so blessed a place. And some said, “God forbid that I should sleep if I were there”; and some, “God save him though he sleeps!” And one who stood almost upon the threshold, and knew that he should be one of the first to pass, hushed these voices and said low, “It is the beginning of the mystery and of the new birth.” And a murmur arose very softly, and a faint crying, “What did he do to attain the heavenly gift?” But the soul upon the threshold hushed them all: “Sleep came upon him while he prayed. Be still and see the goodness of the Lord: he prayed not for himself but for another.”

The night had gone while these voices went and came: and he that spoke last caught with his words the little morning breeze which at that moment sprang up with the first glimmer of the sun; and all around the living walls of that house not made with hands it breathed back the words, “not for himself but another,” like a song: and blowing in at the wide

door—for nothing can stop the winds of God, which make all the world pure—breathed over the young man where he lay. And in his sleep he felt the soft touch upon his forehead like the hand of his mother, and waking, having prayed for her till he slept, prayed again when he was roused, with a soft cry of “God save her!” while still he was but half awake. And in the waking he lay a long time forgetting where he was. And he saw something white and wonderful stretched upon the flowers where he lay, and knew not what it was. Then slowly as he came to himself he remembered everything, and saw from the east the first arrow of gold that told of the sunrise, and in the great peace of his heart he prayed no more, for it seemed to him that his prayer was heard. So sweet was that calm that he lay and did not move, recollecting himself, and saying to himself that it was good to be here, and listening to the birds, which were all awake and already singing the morning song which he had learned to know so well. And some descended swift through the air, and perched close to him upon the steps of the altar and on the lower pinnacles, and sang as if to burst their throats in a tumult and outcry of joy. Blessed creatures, little children of God! he followed with a smile one that came almost within reach of his hand. And then his eyes were drawn again to something white and wonderful which lay as he lay upon the floor. Some one, he said to himself, had laid an angel’s mantle over him as he slept; and there came a rush of soft tears to his eyes, and his heart melted with gratitude and kindness. But when he moved it moved with him, and putting out an astonished hand, he suddenly touched and knew that this was he—no mantle even

of an angel, but the body of a man. Oh, holy house not made with hands! oh, Temple of the Lord!—for this was he.

And a voice said:

“He hath accepted that which was allotted to him, and acknowledged that it was just; therefore there is now given to him the higher state.

“He hath acknowledged his Lord; wherefore his Lord doth not forget to acknowledge him.

“And here he hath come to seek the face of God, not for himself but for another; wherefore he goes hence blessed, with the blessing he has not sought.”

The young man had not gone back half the way to the city of his fathers when he was met by a shining company, all radiant in their best apparel, with music and with song; and in front of all was his brother, whose arrival he had beheld before he set forth. And lo! while all men looked and held their breath, they stood together, two fair young men—fairer than they had been on earth, or than any man is to whom has not been given the house not made with hands. And together they went back to their father’s house to do the work which God might give them, whether it was humble or whether it was great, until the day should come when the books shall be opened and all the worlds stand together in their armies and battalions before the face of the Lord. But of that day knoweth no man, not even the Son, but the Father—as was told us by our Lord.

As for the prayer which he made, and which was answered in a way he asked not, it is still unfulfilled: yet they know it is not forgotten, for nothing is forgotten before God.