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Masaru Uchida, Gifu University

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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.
The text was generated using ChatGPT and prepared for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

Source Text

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Richard Marsh, *The Beetle: A Mystery* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

Part 1

"'No room. Full up."

The man shut the door in my face, and for a moment I simply stood there and stared at the wood. I had spent the whole day looking for work and had found none. I had asked for even the smallest job, anything that might buy me one little meal, and every time I had failed. Now I had come to the workhouse for a bed, and even that last poor hope had been taken from me.

I had never thought that my life could fall so low. To be poor was bad enough. To be hungry, wet, and too tired to stand was worse. But to come like a homeless tramp to the place made for tramps, and then be refused, felt like the end of everything.

As I stood there, a man came out of the dark and stopped near me. His clothes were only rags, and his voice was rough from drink or cold or both. He asked, "They won't let you in?" I said, "He says it is full."

The man gave a hard little laugh. He told me that they always said that. In his opinion, they liked to keep the numbers low and turn men away if they could. When I asked if they had the right to do that, he said they did not, and that if he were me, he would ring again and make them answer properly.

I was weak and slow in mind, but I did as he said. I rang the bell a second time. The same gray old pauper opened the door, and his face showed nothing but anger and contempt.

I asked to be admitted, and he said I would not be. I asked to see the master, and he said I would not see him either. When he tried to shut the door again, I put my foot in the way and asked if the ward was truly full. He said it had been full for two hours, shoved me back with his arm, and slammed the door before I could speak again.

The ragged man had watched the whole thing. He cursed the old fellow and

the whole world together. Then the rain, which had been waiting in the air, began to fall in a thin cold mist. It went through my poor clothes at once, and I felt as if the night itself had turned against me.

The man asked if I had any money. I told him I had not a farthing. He asked if I had done this kind of thing before, and I said this was my first visit to a workhouse, and very likely my last.

He told me Kensington was some miles away, and St George's might be a better chance. Then he began to speak of himself, of how he had walked all the way from Reading and meant to get a bed in Hammersmith before the night was done. When I asked how he meant to do it without money, he bent down, picked up two stones, and showed me.

He threw the first stone through the glass above the door. The crash rang out in the wet dark. The second followed before the gray pauper could stop him. The man seemed pleased with himself, because he believed that now the police would give him a bed, even if the workhouse would not.

I did not stay to see more. Other people were already coming, and I slipped away before anyone could notice me. Yet as I walked, weak and wet, I almost turned back. The thought came into my mind that perhaps I too should break a window and let the law feed me for one night. I hated myself for thinking it, but hunger makes ugly thoughts feel near and easy.

It was a terrible night for walking. The rain was fine, but it soaked everything. The streets were badly lit, and I did not know that part of Hammersmith at all. I had come there because I had failed everywhere else in London. I had tried so many places for work that I had begun to think Hammersmith was the last corner left for me. And now even there I was not wanted.

I turned down the first road I saw, and soon the houses grew fewer. The path was rough, the road uneven, and the whole place looked half built and half forgotten. It seemed that I was leaving the city behind and walking into some empty land where no one lived and no one cared.

I had not eaten properly since Sunday night. Since then I had had only water from public fountains and one crust of bread given to me by a poor man I had

found sitting under a tree in Holland Park. It was now Wednesday night. For three days I had walked London looking for work with almost nothing in my stomach, and I knew very well that if I did not get food soon, I might simply fall and not rise again.

Every step became harder. My feet dragged. My knees bent under me. More than once I leaned against a fence or wall because the world seemed to turn black in front of my eyes. There are pains that are sharp, and there are pains that are dull, but hunger after many days is like something crying inside your body without rest.

At last I stumbled against a low wall and clung to it. The dizziness was so strong that I thought I would faint. When it passed a little, I said aloud, like a madman, “For a loaf of bread, what would I not do?”

Then I saw the house. It was a small detached house close to the road, with three windows above and two below. The blinds were down upstairs. The front door stood a little to my right beyond a gate. And on the lower floor, in the bow window, the bottom sash was open some inches.

I looked at that open window as if it were the answer to a prayer, or the opening of hell. It was near enough that I could reach it with my hand if I leaned over the wall. The rain ran down my face and neck, and my whole body shook with cold. Inside, I imagined warmth, dryness, and perhaps food.

I told myself that perhaps the house was empty. If people were inside, I could knock and warn them that they had left the window open. But if the house was empty, then knocking would only make noise and gain me nothing. I had learned already that the world did not reward honesty simply because honesty was honest.

I climbed over the wall very quietly. The ground inside felt firm under my feet. I bent and looked through the opening, but the room was black. I listened with my ear near the crack and heard nothing at all. So I pushed the window higher, slowly, ready for a creak. None came.

I raised it all the way. Still no sound. I put my head and shoulders inside, but I could see nothing. The darkness was complete. At last I told myself that if the house truly was empty, I had at least some right to its shelter, if not by law then by simple human need. So I lifted myself over the sill and stood inside.

The first thing I noticed was the carpet. It was thick and soft under my tired feet, softer than any carpet I had ever known. After the broken road outside, it felt almost unreal. For one foolish second I thought of lying down there and sleeping like a dead man till morning.

But hunger drove me on. I moved forward carefully, my hands held out so that I would not strike against a chair or table. After only a few steps, without hearing anything and without touching anything, a dreadful feeling came over me. I knew, though I cannot say how, that I was not alone in the room.

Nothing moved. Nothing spoke. I still saw nothing. Yet I felt watched. I felt that some strange and evil thing was there with me in the darkness, quietly seeing every step I made.

Fear took hold of me so strongly that I could not move. I stood still, hardly daring to breathe. Then at last, after what may have been seconds or minutes, I tried to master myself. I told myself that whatever was there had let me enter without a sound, and perhaps it was as afraid of me as I was of it.

I tried to turn my head, but even that was hard. My heart beat so loudly that I could hear it. Then, somewhere in front of me, I heard a slight movement. I stared into the dark and saw two little lights.

They were like eyes. I tried to tell myself they were the eyes of a cat, but I did not believe my own thought. The lights moved closer. Then there came a soft wet sound, and the eyes dropped lower, almost to the floor, before moving toward me again.

I still could not run. I still could not cry out. The thing came on in silence, swaying a little from side to side. Then it reached my feet. A moment later I felt something touch my boot, and then begin to climb.

It came slowly up my legs, light and sticky, with many small points of pressure that felt like legs. The shape was still hidden, but in my terror I thought of a huge spider from some evil dream. It clung to me and climbed higher, and all the time I stood helpless like a man in a nightmare.

As it rose, its eyes shone more brightly, and I began to see a little of its body, a yellowish thing, larger than I had first believed. It seemed heavy, yet it held to

me with ease. Worst of all was the smell, foul and sickening, growing stronger as it neared my face.

It reached my chest, then my throat. I felt it touch the skin of my neck and crawl upward with awful slowness. At last it touched my chin, then my lips, and its body spread over my face. That was more than I could bear.

Madness gave me strength where fear had taken it away. I shook myself violently. The thing fell to the floor with a wet sound. I cried out, turned, and ran for the window. My hand was already on the sill when, behind me, someone struck a light.

Part 2

A voice spoke behind me. It said, “Keep still,” and I obeyed before I could even think. There was something in that voice which made refusal impossible. It was low and harsh, with a foreign sound in it, and there was malice in it too, like poison hidden inside soft words.

Then it said, “Turn round,” and again I did exactly as I was told. I hated my own obedience even while I gave it. I knew that this weakness was shameful, and yet I could not fight it. In that room, with that unseen speaker near me, I had no strength that was truly my own.

When I turned, I saw that the room was no longer dark. A small lamp stood on a shelf above the head of a bed, and its light was so bright that it hurt my eyes. For a few moments I could see little except white light and moving spots. Then the shapes in the room grew clear, and what I saw made me wish that I had stayed outside in the rain.

Someone was lying in the bed. At first I could not tell if it was a man or a woman. Then I thought that perhaps it was not fully human at all. Only the head showed above the bedclothes, and that head seemed so strange that I could hardly believe it was real.

The figure lay on one side, with its head resting on one hand, and stared at me as if it could see through my skin and into my heart. I felt that those eyes

understood me better than I understood myself. The face looked terribly old, and yet the eyes held a life and force that did not belong to old age.

There was no hair on the head or face. The skin was yellow and deeply lined. The skull was small, the nose was large and sharp like the beak of a cruel bird, and the mouth seemed too near the nose, because there was almost no chin at all. The whole face looked wrong, as if it had not been made in the usual way.

But the eyes were the worst thing about it. They were long and narrow and bright in a way that was not natural. They seemed to shine from inside, like lamps set behind thin glass. I could not escape them, and the longer I looked, the smaller and weaker I felt.

At last the creature spoke again. It told me to shut the window, and I shut it. It told me to pull down the blind, and I obeyed. Then it asked my name, and I answered, though it did not feel as if the answer came from my own will. It felt as if he pulled the words out of me.

I said that my name was Robert Holt. He asked what I was, and I told him I was a clerk. Then he asked what kind of clerk I was, and when I said I had no position, he mocked me and said I looked like a man without work. His scorn burned more sharply because I had no power to hide from it.

He asked why I had come through the window. I said it was because it had been open. He pressed me again, and at last I said the simple truth, piece by piece, because that was all I could give him. I was wet. I was cold. I was hungry. I was tired.

Then came more questions. Had I a home. Had I money. Had I friends. Each time I answered no. Behind each little answer there stood my whole sad history, but he did not make me tell it. It was enough for him to know that I was broken down and alone.

I stood there thinking of the months behind me, of one lost position after another, of the long search through London, of the shame of growing poorer and shabbier with every week. It seemed to me that perhaps he knew all this already from my face, or from some darker power of his own. His eyes made me feel as if nothing in me could remain hidden.

Then he ordered me to undress. I obeyed, though every piece of clothing that fell from me seemed to carry away the last remains of my pride. He looked at my bare body with a sickening kind of pleasure and said that I had a white skin, and that he would give much for such a skin as mine. His words filled me with disgust, but still I did what he told me.

He sent me to a cupboard where I found a long dark cloak, and I put it around me. Then he told me to go to another cupboard. There I found meat, hard bread, and a little sour wine. I ate like an animal, without manners and almost without breathing, because hunger had made me less than a gentleman and almost less than a man.

He watched me all the time in silence. When I had eaten as much as I could, he told me to put back what remained. Then he said, “Look at me.” I did so, and in that instant I felt something leave me, as if my own self was being drawn away.

His eyes seemed to grow larger and larger until they filled the whole world. He moved one hand in the air, and I do not know what he did, but the ground seemed to vanish under me. I fell forward and lay where I had fallen, unable to stir. A moment later the lamp went out.

Yet I did not lose consciousness. That was the worst part of all. My body might as well have been dead, but my mind stayed awake through the whole long night. I heard him move once in the bed as if settling himself to sleep, and after that there was silence in the room while I lay like a corpse who could still think.

I began to ask myself if I really was dead. The question came again and again until it became a kind of torture. What if a man’s body could die and his mind still remain? What if I had already crossed out of life and could do nothing now but wait in darkness with my own fear?

At last the sounds of morning began outside. I heard wheels in the road, footsteps, birds, a cat, a dog, the noise of a milk can. Light slowly pressed against the blind. Rain still touched the window now and then. Somewhere far away a clock struck seven, then later eight, nine, and ten.

Until ten there was no sound from the bed. Then I heard movement, and soon the creature stood over me in daylight. In the clearer light its shape was no comfort.

It wore a strange coloured garment, and when it bent above me, I thought with horror that no truly human face could look like that.

It pulled away the cloak and examined me as if I were meat in a market. Fingers pushed my cheeks, opened my mouth, touched my eyes, and treated me like a thing and not a living person. Then its lips touched mine in a kiss so foul and evil that even now I can hardly bear to remember it.

After that it stood up and said, “Dead. As good as dead. Better. We will have him buried.” Whether it spoke to me or to itself I do not know. Then I heard a door open and shut, and I knew that it had gone from the house.

It stayed away through the day. Since I could hear everything and move nothing, I learned the emptiness of the house by listening. Now and then people came to the door. They knocked or rang, perhaps tradesmen with goods to bring, but no one answered them, and every one of them went away again.

About noon another visitor came, and this one was stranger than the others. I heard the gate, then a soft call at the front door, a thin little cry like the squeak of a rat. It came three times. Then the caller went away. Later it came again, and then again, each time trying the same signal and then retreating in silence.

In the afternoon the creature grew bolder. It tapped softly at the front, then moved around the house and made the same signal at the back. Still no answer came. After dark it returned once more and tried the windows too, making sharp little sounds against the glass.

At the window of my room something even stranger happened. Instead of a tap at once, I heard something climbing up from outside, scratching and struggling for hold on the wall. At first I had thought the visitor was a man or a woman. Now I began to think it must be some animal, though no animal I knew behaved in such a way.

It reached the sill at last, breathing hard as if the climb had tired it. Then the tapping began, quick and sharp, not like knuckles but more like claws or nails. There were squeaks, angry and rising, and a buzzing sound almost like the purring of a cat, but harsher and more terrible.

It rubbed itself against the glass as if it wanted to force its way in. The tapping

grew wild and fast. More than once I thought the window would break and that thing would come crashing into the room with me. But the glass held, and at last the visitor seemed to lose patience, fell or jumped from the sill, and went away through the gate once more.

For two or three hours after that, nothing happened. Then, some time after ten, I heard running outside and the same strange cries again, only this time there seemed to be two creatures instead of one. They fought on the step in a fury that I could hear clearly even from where I lay helpless on the floor.

After a short time, one of them seemed to win, because the other fled with cries of pain. I expected the survivor to come again to the window. Instead I heard a key pushed into the front door. The lock turned. The door flew open and then shut with a bang.

A moment later the door of my room crashed open too. I heard hurried steps, the sound of bedclothes, and then the bright lamp shone again just as it had the night before. The voice I knew too well said only two words. “Stand up.”

At once I stood. I had no choice. I faced the bed and saw the being I had met before, in the same pose as earlier, with its head on its hand and its eyes fixed on me. Yet though it was surely the same creature, something in its face and form had changed.

Part 3

The change in the creature on the bed was plain even to my frightened eyes. It was still the same dreadful being, yet it no longer looked quite so old and withered as before. Many of the deep lines in its face had softened. The nose was still sharp, but less monstrous. There was even something almost woman-like now in the shape of the cheeks and mouth, though the whole face remained so hateful that I could hardly bear to look at it.

There were fresh marks on the face too, as if it had lately been in some wild struggle. Scratches ran across the skin. The eyes burned more fiercely than ever, and the mouth moved with a restless excitement which made me think for a

moment that the creature was mad. When it spoke, the words rushed out fast and broken, and it repeated itself again and again as though its own thoughts were on fire.

It cried that I was not dead after all, that I had come back to life, and that now I must live on for its sake. Then it made a movement with one hand, and at once the dead stillness in my body broke. My limbs were mine again, though not truly free. I could stand, speak, and breathe as an ordinary man, but still I felt its will pressing on me like an iron band.

It called me a thief once more. I said that I was not a thief, but the words had little force, even to my own ears. It answered that only thieves came through windows, and that because I had entered its house that way, I would now enter another house the same way. That other house, it said, was the house of Paul Lessingham.

At the name, its whole manner changed. First there was rage, then a strange bitter tenderness, then rage again. It spoke of Lessingham as a great man, handsome and strong, a man who might make a woman proud and happy. Then in the next breath it called him hard, false, cruel, and faithless. I could not understand how such opposite feelings could live together in one breast, but I saw that the name of Paul Lessingham was tied in some deep and terrible way to all this creature's life.

When it found that I did not know where Mr Lessingham lived, it said that it would show me. It said it would guide me through the night though I would not see it. I was to go as I was, barefoot and bareheaded, with only the cloak around me. I would be cold, it said, and my feet would bleed, but that was good enough for a thief.

Then it told me exactly what I must do. I was to look for a window and enter the house. I was to find the room which Mr Lessingham used as his study. In one corner stood a bureau, and in that bureau was a drawer. I was to open that drawer whether it was locked or not. Inside, I would find some letters tied together with a silk ribbon, and I was to steal them and bring them back.

I tried once more to resist. I asked what would happen if Mr Lessingham found

me in the act. I said that he was not the kind of man to let a robber go free. The creature answered in a cold, sure way which frightened me more than open violence would have done. It said that Mr Lessingham would not touch me, and that I needed only two words to protect myself.

I asked what those words were. The creature leaned on one hand and stared at me with blazing eyes. Then, in a voice which rose till it was almost a scream, it gave me them. “The Beetle!” it cried.

The instant the words left its lips, the lamp went out. The room was black again. At once I knew that the loathsome thing from the night before was with me in the darkness. I saw the two little lights of its eyes. I heard something fall from the bed to the floor and come creeping toward me.

It moved with that same slow, sticky approach which had nearly driven me mad before. I stood frozen while it came nearer and nearer, until at last I felt its slimy touch on my bare feet. The horror of feeling it on my skin gave me back my voice, and I cried out like a man under torture.

My cry seemed to drive it away. For a moment all was still. Then the lamp flared up again, and there lay the creature in the bed exactly as before, watching me with cruel satisfaction. It told me that if Mr Lessingham tried to stop me, I was to stand still and say those two words, and if he still resisted, I was to say them again. There was such certainty in the thing’s voice that against my own reason I began to fear that the words truly held some wicked power.

I do not know in what exact way the final command was laid on me. I only know that after more of those fixed looks and low, burning words, my own power of choice slipped farther away. I felt the order settle on my mind like a weight. I was no longer deciding anything. I was merely waiting to do what I had been told.

Presently I found myself outside in the street. The rain had not ceased, and the cold cut me like a knife. The cloak wrapped me badly, and the stones bit into my bare feet. Yet in spite of all this, I went on. I did not know the way, yet somehow I never seemed in doubt. It was as if an unseen guide went beside me, turning me this way and that.

The streets changed as I walked. Poor roads gave place to better ones. Dark

empty stretches gave place to houses of a richer sort. I do not know how long I went, because I moved like a man in a dream. The city seemed half real and half hidden, and all the while I felt that something not human kept close to my shoulder.

At last I came to a house which I knew at once must be the one I sought. I cannot explain how I knew. I only knew it with the same dreadful certainty with which I had known that there was something in the dark room watching me. I stood before it for a moment, then began to look for a way in.

Fortune, or misfortune, served me too well. A window gave me the chance I needed. I got through, not boldly, but with the frightened care of a man who hates what he is doing and yet cannot stop. Once inside, I stood and listened. All seemed still.

Then, just as the creature had promised, I found my way to the study as if the room had already been shown to me. In one corner stood the bureau. I went to it and found the drawer. It was not easy work, but by desperate handling and blind luck I got it open.

Inside was what I had been sent for. There were letters, two or three perhaps, tied together with a silk ribbon. I took them, and the moment I held them in my hand, I felt more strongly than ever that I must get out at once. Shame, fear, and disgust all rose in me together, and for one instant I almost thought that I might throw the letters down and run.

That instant passed too late. Someone came. I was discovered in the house by Paul Lessingham himself. In another moment I should have been seized, and with justice. I had broken into his home like a common thief, and I had the stolen letters in my hand.

Yet the terrible words forced on me came to my lips before I could think. I stood still and said, “The Beetle.” Even as I spoke them I hated them. But they had an effect which was plain and dreadful. The strength seemed to go out of the man before me.

He looked at me not as one looks at a burglar, nor even as one looks at a madman, but as one looks at some thing from an old nightmare suddenly made real. I do not say that he was a coward. I do not think he was. But those two words

struck him with a fear deeper than ordinary fear.

Because of that fear he let me go. I do not know whether I brushed past him or whether he stepped back from me. I only know that one moment he was there, and the next I was out and running. I fled into the night with the packet under my cloak, driven on by terror, by weakness, and by the power which still held me in chains.

I had done the thing. I, Robert Holt, who had once lived honestly and quietly as a clerk, had broken into a gentleman's house and stolen private letters. There was no comfort for me in saying that I had been forced. The shame of it stayed with me even while I ran. Behind the shame there stood another thought, darker still. If those words could break Paul Lessingham in that manner, then the evil which commanded me was greater and more terrible than I had yet begun to understand.

Part 4

The drawer had hardly burst open under the shot before I heard a sound behind me and looked back. The door stood open, and there was Paul Lessingham with his hand still on the handle. He wore evening dress and held a small case in one hand, as if he had only that moment returned home. If he felt surprise at seeing a half-naked stranger in his study with a revolver and his letters in hand, he showed very little of it.

He was a handsome man, tall and well built, with an air of complete self-command. Even in that dreadful moment I noticed the calm in his face and the clear sharp look of his eyes. He stood for a few seconds without speaking, and I felt his gaze on me like the gaze of a strong bird watching smaller prey. Then he asked, in a voice so easy and polite that it sounded almost absurd in such a scene, who I was and by what right I had come into his room.

I gave no answer, because no answer in my mouth belonged to me unless the other will behind me allowed it. Perhaps my strange appearance made him think me mad. Perhaps he saw at once that something was very wrong and not merely

criminal. At any rate, he came a little nearer and spoke again, still in that cool, almost friendly voice, telling me that if I had made some foolish mistake, the best thing would be to put down the weapon and explain myself.

But I did not move. My hand closed on the packet of letters, and the spell that drove me held me as stiff as wood. He came nearer still. Then I saw a change in him. It was only slight at first, but it was plain. Something in my face, or in my silence, or perhaps in the whole unnatural look of me, touched some old memory in his mind.

He stopped and stared harder. The calmness in him gave way a little. He seemed to be listening inwardly, not to me but to something buried far away in his own past. When he spoke again, it was no longer with the same easy tone. There was caution in it now, and something else too, something very close to fear.

He called to a servant named Matthews, and the man came in, followed soon by others who had caught the sound of the shot. Lessingham told them to stay ready but to leave the matter to him if possible. Then he turned back to me and said that I stood on the edge of prison, yet he was still willing to let me go more lightly if I gave him the letters and the revolver at once.

I heard him, but I could not answer. I was like a figure carved in stone. He took another step, and then another, and once again the fear in him rose suddenly and plainly. It was as if some invisible thing in the room touched him before he reached me. He stopped, looked about him with disturbed eyes, and began to speak to himself in broken words, trying to tell himself that he was fooled by nerves and shadows.

Then he cried to Matthews for help. At once the servants rushed in with sticks or whatever weapons they had found near at hand. Their master urged them to knock the revolver from my hand, to take the letters, to seize me before I could escape. He himself came forward too, and in that instant the compulsion on me tightened like a rope.

Out of my throat came the words I had been forced to carry with me. I cried, “The Beetle!” and the effect was instant and terrible. In that same moment the room was dark. I do not know how the lamp went out, and I do not know what

entered the room then, but I know that screams broke from more than one mouth, screams of real terror, not of anger.

I felt that some dreadful presence had come among us. Whether it was a creature of flesh or something born from madness and fear, I cannot say. I only know that under cover of the darkness I was driven forward and out. I ran through the room, into the passage, and onward like a hunted animal. I remember women pressed against the wall and crying out as I passed, but I do not remember any hand trying to catch me.

I had no clear sense of direction. I tore along a broad passage, burst through another door, and reached, I think, a drawing room. There I found a window and flung myself through it to the outside. I fell badly and should have been seriously hurt, but terror lifted me up again before pain could fully come.

As I scrambled to my feet, a hand seized my shoulder with a grip of iron. I turned and found a tall man holding me, a man with a long moustache and a face which, in ordinary times, I might have thought cheerful and kind. Even in that moment he spoke almost playfully. He asked if I had come from some grand party and whether I had climbed down from the church like an acrobat after trying to rob Saint Paul himself.

I could not answer him. He looked at me, and I at him. Something in my face must have told him that the affair was stranger than common theft. Yet instead of stopping me he gave me a small push and told me to be off. I needed no second permission. I ran at once, and I do not think I had ever moved so fast in all my life.

I ran through the streets half blind, the packet crushed in my hand, mud on my skin and blood on my feet. I did not stop to think where I was or where I went. The same dark guidance which had taken me to Lessingham's house now took me back again. Before long I found myself once more before the little house with the open window.

There I stopped suddenly, shaking with weakness. Rain had begun again, driven by the wind. I was wet, bruised, cut, dirty, and almost at the end of my strength. Every part of me cried out for rest. If I had still belonged to myself, I

would have fallen where I stood and slept or died.

But the thing in that house was not finished with me. I felt the command before I heard it, as if some strong pull drew me through the wall and window. Over the low wall I went again, over the sill, and back into that room of shame. At once the old terror came over me, the same sense that evil was near and awake.

I heard something drop from the bed and begin to move toward me on the floor. My fear was so strong that it gave me back the power to scream, and scream I did, again and again. The sound seemed to drive it back. There was silence. Then the lamp was lit, and there on the bed lay the master of my misery, watching me with bright merciless eyes.

He mocked me at once, asking if I always entered houses through windows and whether I felt proud to have been caught by the great Paul Lessingham like a common thief. He enjoyed my shame. He asked if Lessingham had seemed very great when I stood before him. There was a cruel pleasure in his voice, as if every word were meant to cut me deeper.

At last he ordered me to hand over the packet. I did so. He took it with eager fingers and opened it at once. The letters inside had been tied with a ribbon, and he seemed certain that they were what he wanted. But when he looked through them, his face changed.

First came surprise, then disappointment, then a rage so violent that it was almost beyond speech. These were not the letters he had hoped for. They were papers of another kind, useless to him for whatever purpose had filled his mind. He cursed Paul Lessingham, cursed me, and cursed the failure of the whole business as though the mistake itself were a personal insult.

Then his fury turned on me more directly. He called me fool and bungler because I had not brought the right papers. I wanted to cry out that I had found only what lay in the drawer he had shown me, and that every step had been taken under his command, not mine. But my words were useless there. He was master, and I was only the wretched tool he had used.

Yet even in his anger I felt that something had changed. The business with Lessingham had not ended this matter. It had only opened it. Whatever tie lay

between that politician and this dreadful being was far older, darker, and deeper than the theft of a few papers. I did not know then how much worse all would become, but by the time he had thrown down the packet and fixed me again with those burning eyes, I understood one thing well. My misery was only beginning.

Part 5

It was after our second dance that I spoke to Marjorie Lindon as plainly as a man can speak to the woman he wants to marry. We had moved a little aside from the others, into a quieter part of the hall, and I had hardly begun before she touched my sleeve with her fan and asked me to stop. I did not stop. I had reached that point where a man would rather make a fool of himself than keep silence one minute longer.

I told her that I loved her and that she had become the one thing I wanted above all else in life. She answered me very gently, but her gentleness did not make the blow lighter. She said she was sorry, and when I demanded why she should be sorry that a man loved her, she only repeated that she was sorry. It was the softest refusal, but it was refusal all the same.

She admitted that she liked me. I told her that “like” was nothing, that I wanted love. She said that was exactly my mistake. When I pressed her harder, she made it plain that whatever place I had in her thoughts, it was not the place I wanted. She wished me to remain her friend, and I answered like a sulky fool that if I could not be more than a friend, then I would not be a friend at all.

She took my temper much better than I deserved. She kept her calm, looked down at her fan, and went on speaking as if I were an impatient boy who would come to his senses in time. That only made me angrier. A proud man can bear a hard answer better than a kind one. The one cuts him, but the other makes him feel small.

So that was the end of it. I had said my great thing, and I had failed. I left the place with that bitter emptiness which comes when a man has built his whole hope on one answer and receives another. I knew well enough that Paul Lessingham

stood between me and my chance, though Marjorie did not speak his name just then, and the thought of him sat in my mind like a stone.

I did not feel fit either for company or for sleep. I wandered through the streets in an ugly mood, full of jealousy and wounded pride, and yet not so far gone that I could not laugh a little at myself. I am not by nature a quiet sufferer. When I am hurt, I grow restless, active, and disposed to walk the world into the ground rather than sit still and bear my pain with dignity.

It must have been late, very late, when I found myself near Lessingham's house. I cannot say that I had gone there with any settled plan. A man who has just lost the woman he loves does not always choose his road by reason. He drifts toward the places and names that trouble him most, as if pain itself were a kind of guide.

Then something happened which pulled me out of my own thoughts in an instant. I saw a figure come in a strange fashion from the direction of Lessingham's drawing-room window. The fellow was in such a state of half dress, so wild and broken in appearance, that at first glance he looked less like a burglar than like a madman who had escaped from somewhere and forgotten to put on his clothes.

He dropped or climbed down in desperate haste and ran almost straight into my arms. I caught him by the shoulder. Even in that poor light I could see that he was in an evil condition, muddy, shaken, and frightened beyond common fear. For a second or two I joked with him, partly because jest is my habit, and partly because the whole business was so odd that a serious tone did not come first to my lips.

Yet while I spoke, I looked at his face, and something in it checked me. He was not acting. He was not merely guilty. He had the look of a man who had seen something that had gone through him like cold iron. Instead of tightening my hold, I let him go with little more than a push and a word, and away he ran into the darkness.

I have often asked myself since why I did not stop him. He had clearly come from Lessingham's house, and any ordinary man would have held him fast and raised the alarm. But at that moment he seemed to me so unlike an ordinary thief

that the natural rules of the situation somehow failed. It was as if I had laid hands not on a criminal, but on the last piece of some ugly puzzle which I was not yet ready to understand.

After he had gone, I went straight to the hall door and gave notice of what I had seen. Lessingham received me, and there were servants about the place who had plainly been alarmed already. I told him that a man had just come from his drawing-room window. He did not laugh at me, and that itself was enough to show that there was trouble within.

When I learned more, the affair became stranger still. The man had forced open a bureau in the study and had taken a packet of letters. Some of the servants had seen him, and the damage to the room was plain. It was therefore no dream or fancy, but a real break-in, though one carried out in a manner so queer that no plain common word seemed to fit it.

Lessingham himself, I could see, was disturbed in a way which surprised me. He was not merely angry at being robbed. There was in him a deeper agitation, the kind which belongs to old fear and not to fresh annoyance. At the time I did not know the cause, but I saw clearly that the thief, or whatever that poor wretch was, had touched something in Lessingham's life which lay far below the surface.

I knew also that the stolen letters mattered greatly to him. Later I learned that they were letters from Miss Lindon, whom he hoped to marry. That knowledge, of course, threw a cruel new light on the whole business. But even that night, before I understood the full truth, I had already begun to feel that this was no simple robbery for money, and that some person or power stood behind the man I had let escape.

Looking back, I think that midnight meeting was the true beginning of my share in the matter. My rejection by Marjorie had filled me with jealousy and rage, and I had been walking in darkness of my own making. Then suddenly I ran into a darker thing, one that did not belong to ordinary disappointment or ordinary crime. From that moment, whether I wished it or not, I was part of the story.

And there was one detail I could not forget. The man who fled from the window had not looked back at the house as a thief looks back at a danger he may

escape. He had looked as a hunted creature looks back at the mouth of a cave where something worse than death still waits. That expression stayed with me long after the street was empty again, and before the night was over it had begun to trouble my mind almost as much as Marjorie Lindon herself.

Part 6

I slept badly that night, and when I slept I dreamed badly too. In every dream Marjorie was with Paul Lessingham, and in every dream I proved, to my own full satisfaction, that she ought to have been with me instead. Dreams are kind to a man's pride. Morning is not. When I woke, I knew very well that she had refused me and that Lessingham stood where I wanted to stand.

I ate a little, drank a little, and then went into my laboratory to work. Work, in my case, often means dangerous thoughts made useful by science. I was then busy with certain gases and explosive forces, and I believed I was very near to a discovery which might change war in a horrible and complete way. It is odd how easily a disappointed lover can comfort himself with the idea of killing whole armies.

Because the things I handled were deadly, I wore a protective mask of my own design. It covered my head and face, and I trusted it more than I trusted most men. I had had one or two close calls already, and I knew well enough that in a room full of poisons a careless breath can be a last breath. So I was hard at work and not in any mood to receive visitors.

My servant Edwards came in and said that someone wished to see me. I told him to say that I wished to see no one. He was an excellent servant and went away with the message. I thought that was the end of the matter, and turned again to my experiment.

A little later I felt a hand on my shoulder and assumed that Edwards had returned. Without looking round I told him that one tiny turn of a valve might send him out of this world, and asked why he could not stay where he was not wanted. Then I turned, and found not Edwards at all, but a stranger standing close beside

me.

He was an Eastern fellow in a dirty burnous, less bright and more unpleasant than the North African sellers one sees in France. His face was clean-shaven, which somehow made him look stranger still. He was not merely foreign. He had the appearance of belonging to some world outside ordinary London life, and not a pleasant world either.

I asked him who he was, how he had got in, and where my servant was. He lifted one hand, and at that exact moment Edwards came in looking confused and half asleep. When I demanded why he had let the man pass, he said he had tried to stop him, but after one look from the stranger he remembered nothing clearly until he found himself standing in the room again.

That interested me at once. I knew Edwards too well to think he was lying. So I dismissed him and turned back to the visitor with more curiosity than welcome. I asked if he was some kind of magician. He answered not by giving his name, but by placing on the shelf beside me a scrap of paper.

On it were written two words only. “Marjorie Lindon.” I tell the plain truth when I say that the sight of her name changed the whole air of the interview for me. He watched my face and knew that he had found the right key.

I asked if he came from Miss Lindon. Instead of answering directly, he produced a second paper. On this was another name, “Paul Lessingham.” Then he said that she was good and that Lessingham was bad, and he asked if that was not so. I did not know what game he played, but I knew that he meant to use my feeling for Marjorie against my judgment.

He went on in a low, urgent way. He said that I loved her and that I could not bear to think of her in Lessingham’s arms. He said that at a word from me Lessingham should never have her. There was in his eyes, as he spoke, that mesmeric quality which weak men might have found hard to resist. I am not one of the weak kind, and that perhaps saved me from being impressed when another man might have yielded.

So I told him plainly that I saw what he was. He was a mesmerist, or something of that family, and if he wished to try his tricks on me, he had chosen difficult

ground. He drew back a little then, and the look in his face grew more dangerous. He called himself one of the children of Isis and said that when the time came I would call for him, and he would answer, and then Paul Lessingham would be finished.

Before I had decided whether he was a madman or a clever rogue, he was gone. He moved so quickly that by the time I reached the hall I heard only the front door slam. When I ran out into the street and looked both ways, there was no sign of him at all. He had vanished as neatly as if London itself had swallowed him.

I returned to the laboratory more disturbed than I wished to admit. My work no longer held me. I walked up and down thinking of the stranger, of his hatred of Lessingham, and of the way he had spoken Marjorie's name. It seemed to me either an excellent piece of acting or the sign of some very ugly truth. I could not yet decide which.

Edwards came again and told me that Mr Lessingham himself had called. The thing was so strange, coming so soon after the other visitor, that for a moment it gave me an unpleasant little shock. Then Paul came in, calm, neat, and perfectly dressed, looking exactly as a successful public man ought to look. I have always admitted that he is a fine specimen of his kind, and the admission cost me nothing except irritation.

He began with easy talk and thanked me for coming to his house the night before. He said he had probably seemed odd, but he had been worried and unwell, and no one likes to be robbed, even by a lunatic. I asked if he truly believed the man from the window was a lunatic. He said that a man in nothing but a cloak on such a night could hardly be anything else.

Then he asked me not to speak of the affair to anyone. He was anxious, he said, to keep it out of the newspapers and out of common talk. That was natural enough in a public man, yet something in his manner suggested that his reasons went beyond mere dislike of gossip. I had seen enough already to suspect that the burglary had touched some nerve in him deeper than wounded pride.

After that, in an almost careless tone, he turned the talk to ancient religions. He asked what I knew of the worship of Isis, whether any real followers of that

old faith might still exist, and whether the scarab beetle had been one of its holy signs. Then his questions became stranger still. He asked if any priest or follower of Isis had ever been believed to take the form of a beetle, even in the act of dying.

I stared at him, and naturally enough. From Paul Lessingham of all men in London, such questions sounded absurd. Yet he asked them with a seriousness he could not wholly hide, and behind that seriousness I saw something I had not expected in him. It was not curiosity. It was fear.

I tried to make him tell me the story which lay behind his questions, but he would not. He said that he was bound in honour and could not speak yet. Then, as he picked up his hat and umbrella to go, his eye fell on a small sheet of paper lying near us on the shelf.

I had not seen that paper there before. I do not know how it came there. On it was a picture of a beetle, done so cleverly and in such shining colour that for an instant it looked almost alive. Before I had fully taken that in, Lessingham gave a sound which was hardly human, dropped what was in his hands, and fell back against the wall as if the paper itself had struck him.

He crouched there trembling, and when I went to him he looked up at me with the face of a man trapped in some private hell. He tried to say that he was quite well, but no one with eyes could have believed him. When I held up the picture toward him, he shrank still farther away and cried out, “Take it away! Tear it up! Burn it!”

His terror was so real that I did as he begged. I tore the paper into pieces and burned each piece with a match while he watched. Only when the last bit had turned to ash did he seem able to breathe freely again. Then he tried to gather himself and become Paul Lessingham once more, the composed man of the world, but he did not fully succeed.

He said it was all connected with a strange story which one day he might tell me. He asked me, above all things, to keep what I had seen to myself, and especially not to mention it to Miss Lindon. I answered that if silence was needed, I would keep it, though I liked the business less and less with every minute. He thanked me and went away.

After he had gone, I knew there would be no more work from me that day. My mind was in confusion. Marjorie, Paul, Isis, mesmerism, burglary, the stranger in the burnous, and that beetle picture all circled together in my head till thought itself grew hot and useless. So I gave up the laboratory, took to the river instead, and tried, without much success, to row my mind back into order.

Part 7

That night there was a great ball at the Duchess of Datchet's house, and the first person I saw when I entered the room was Dora Grayling. The sight of her reminded me at once that I had behaved badly to her the evening before. I had been restless, jealous, and full of myself, and I had let my bad temper show. So I went straight to her and asked her pardon as neatly as I could.

Dora took it kindly. She did not make me feel foolish by talking too much about my bad manners. Instead, she asked if I was better, as if the fault had come from illness and not from character. I told her I was quite well, and begged her to forgive me fully by giving me the dance I had lost the night before.

She rose at once, though another man came up and claimed that the dance was already his. Dora looked at him and said, very calmly, that she must have made a mistake. Then she took my arm and went away with me, leaving him to stare after us. I had not known she could be so firm, and I liked her better for it, though my heart was still elsewhere.

We danced the waltz through together, and when it was over we went out to a little covered place on the balcony. Dora has a way of listening which draws talk out of a man before he knows what he is doing. In a very short time I was telling her all sorts of things about myself, my plans, my work, and even the wild new idea which was then in my head for a weapon of enormous force. It was foolish talk for a ballroom, but she listened as if it mattered.

There is a kind sympathy which asks no questions and yet wins confidence. Dora had that gift. For a little while I almost forgot Marjorie, or rather I forgot my pain in talking about other things. Yet the forgetfulness did not last long. A man

does not escape a wound by speaking of gunpowder.

Soon after that, I came by chance upon Percy Woodville, and in one of those loose moments when a man talks because he is tired of keeping his thoughts in, I let him see how deeply I cared for Marjorie Lindon. Percy was surprised enough, and I cannot blame him. Then, before the matter could go farther, I nearly ran into Marjorie herself.

She was leaving and asked me to see her to her carriage. I did so, of course. When we reached it, she asked if I would come with her to the House of Commons. I asked what called her there, though I knew the answer before she gave it.

She said that Paul Lessingham was to speak and that she always tried to be present when he spoke. There was no shame in her admiration. She wore it openly and proudly, as if a great light shone from him and she was glad to stand in it. I answered that he was a fortunate man, and she replied that “fortunate” was too small a word for a man of such gifts.

After she drove away, I met Percy again in the hall. He was also going to the House because a division was expected. When I told him that Marjorie had gone to hear Lessingham, he became excited at once and declared that if he had known enough about the subject, he would have made a speech himself to show her what he could do. I told him to go and speak by all means, and in the end I went with him, so that Paul Lessingham might have, as I said, an audience of three.

The House was full when we reached it. We went up to the strangers’ gallery, and at first some dull old speaker was on his feet, talking in the flat dead way that kills every living thought in a room. Hardly anyone listened. But when he sat down there came movement everywhere, men gathered in, and then I saw Paul Lessingham rise from the Opposition benches.

I watched him closely. During the last day my interest in him had grown very sharp indeed. I had seen him that morning shaken by fear in my own room, and now here he stood before a crowded House, calm, strong, and perfectly in command of himself. The contrast was so great that it almost seemed impossible that the frightened man and this public fighter could be one and the same.

Yet the longer I looked, the more I admired him. I like force in a man when I

see it, even in a rival. There was no uncertainty in him then, no trace of weakness, no sign that any private terror had ever touched his heart. He belonged to that place as naturally as a strong swimmer belongs to water.

When he began to speak, the House felt it at once. I do not mean that every member agreed with him. I mean that every member knew a real speaker was on his feet. His words carried weight, his voice carried power, and he had that gift, rare in any field, of making intelligence seem like action. One felt not only that he understood his subject, but that he could bend a whole crowd to his own movement.

I forgot my jealousy for a while and gave myself up to the speech. It was not merely clever. It was alive. I could see why men followed him in politics and why women like Marjorie looked on him with shining eyes. Before he had done, I almost wished that I too were in public life, if only to know what it was to stand up and hold a great room in the hollow of one's hand.

When the business of the night was over and we were again in the lobby, all talk was of Lessingham's speech. Then Marjorie came to me, her face bright with happiness and pride. She asked if it had not been splendid and magnificent, and I saw that she wanted me to praise him as warmly as she did.

I answered coldly that it was not a bad speech, of a kind. That was enough. Her eyes flashed at once, and she rebuked me with spirit. She said that small minds try to make great ones look smaller, and that my refusal to admit Lessingham's greatness only showed weakness in myself.

Her words stung me, and I answered more sharply than I should have done. I said something bitter which suggested that she might learn better in time. Before she could force me to explain, Lessingham himself came up and said that he hoped he had not kept her waiting. She turned to him at once, and her tone changed as quickly as light changes when the sun comes out.

He noticed me then and spoke civilly enough. I answered that I hoped he was better than when I had last seen him. For one instant there came into his eyes a quick gleam which showed he understood me. But it passed at once, and he said only that he was very well.

Then they went away together, and I was left with my old trouble and a new one besides. Marjorie's love for him was plain. His power over the world was plain. And yet I had seen fear in him such as no ordinary danger could explain. So while others spoke only of his triumph that night, I could not forget the shadow that stood behind it.

Part 8

When I left the House that night, Percy Woodville was waiting for me in a state of great misery. He looked as if the world had ended for him. It soon appeared that, in his own mind, it nearly had. He told me that he had been struck down by love, and that the person who had done the damage was Dora Grayling.

I did not treat his pain with much tenderness. That is not my way. I told him that if a man loved a woman and lost her to another fellow, what he might naturally feel was not patience but murder. Percy was too unhappy to laugh. So I took him with me in a cab and said that, since the night had begun badly, we might as well finish it together in my laboratory.

On the way we passed Lessingham's house, and I thought I saw some figure slip into the shadow by the door. I jumped out and looked, but found no one there. Even the cabman said he had thought he saw someone too. That little moment stayed in my mind, because after all that had happened already, I had begun to feel that mystery hung about the place like fog.

When we reached my rooms, Percy was in a weak, sentimental mood, and I was in one of those sharp moods in which a man talks too much because he is trying not to feel too much. I set before him my newest idea, the one I had spoken of before with half a joke and half a threat. It was a deadly vapour, shut inside tiny glass pellets, to be broken at the desired moment and place. I had even made a little spring gun to send the pellet where I wanted it to go.

I showed Percy one of the pellets and told him that if he wanted an easy end for a broken heart, one squeeze under the nose would do the business. He wanted no such comfort and shrank away from it. Then, in a spirit I cannot defend, I

turned to a cat which I had shut in a glass case for experiment. The creature happened to be one which I chose to think of as Paul Lessingham's cat, and that made the ugly joke more tempting to me than it should have been.

Percy begged me to let the poor brute go, but I would not. I set the gun, sent the pellet into the case, and in a moment the glass ball broke and the vapour spread. The cat fell dead almost at once. I pointed to it and began talking like a fool about how a great shell filled with such stuff could kill whole armies in an instant. Even Percy, half drunk and half in love, had sense enough to be sickened by the sight and by my cheerful talk.

Then came the real disaster. Percy emptied his glass and flung the tumbler away in childish temper. I had carelessly left another pellet too near the edge of the table. The shock of the glass striking the board set the pellet rolling. I saw what would happen and sprang forward, but I was too late.

The pellet fell to the floor at Percy's feet and broke there. He was looking down at it when it smashed. In the same instant the vapour touched the air, and he dropped forward on his face without a word. I caught him up as quickly as I could and dragged him to the door which opened into the yard, because I knew that if I did not get him into fresh air at once, he was as good as dead.

I had barely got him outside when I found someone standing there in the shadow. It was the strange Eastern visitor who had come to my laboratory that morning. By then I myself was half overcome, because in saving Percy I had been too near the poison for too long. I remember stumbling, losing my senses, and saying, with what seemed like bitter justice, "Atherton's Magic Vapour!"

When I came back to myself, I found that I was being held up, and the first thing I saw was that extraordinary pair of eyes bent over me. I pulled away from him at once and looked for Percy. He lay still on the ground, so still that I feared his heart had already stopped. I knew what danger he was in, but my head was so confused that I could hardly think what to do next.

The stranger did not waste time in speech. He threw himself down beside Percy, passed his arms under him, and put his lips to the young man's as if he meant to breathe life out of his own body into another's. It was the strangest sight I had

ever seen. Yet before long there came movement in Percy's limbs, then stronger movement, and then so sudden a return of force that the stranger was rolled off him altogether.

Even then Percy did not look well. His face was stiff and ugly, and his skin had that damp look which no doctor likes. But the stranger passed his hand before Percy's face in a curious, controlled way, and the whole appearance changed. The strained look went out of the features, and presently Percy seemed less like a dying man than a man in deep sleep.

I asked if he had hypnotised him. He answered, more or less, that the name did not matter. Then he told me that Percy would live, that he would wake and remember nothing, and that I could leave him for a while in the warm night air without fear. There was something in his manner which made contradiction seem small and useless. Against my will, I began to feel a sort of respect for him.

That respect did not drive away my distrust. I knew that I was dealing with no ordinary man. He had entered my house when he pleased, read feeling from my face, and now he had done what looked very like a miracle with a body that had been all but dead. Whether the thing was science, mesmerism, or something darker, I could not tell. But from that hour I no longer thought of Paul Lessingham's mysterious visitor as a mere trickster. I began to understand that he was dangerous in ways I did not yet understand, and that if he chose to move against us again, simple reason might not be enough to stop him.

Part 9

When I had recovered breath enough to think, I shut the laboratory door and turned to look properly at the stranger who had saved Percy Woodville's life. He stood a little way off, calm enough on the surface, though I did not trust that calm for a second. In the full light of the room he was more unpleasant than before. He looked Eastern to the very ends of his fingers, and yet I could not have said from what land he came.

He was old and not old at once. His face was lined like the face of a creature

which had lived too long, but his eyes were full of young force and dangerous fire. They had a queer shape, and as I looked at them I was again struck by the same thought that had touched me before. They were like the eyes of some strange insect, some hard shining thing not made to be friendly with men.

I have as firm an eye as most people, and I am not easy to stare down. Even so, I felt that if I relaxed my will for a moment, he would master me. There was something that seemed to pass from his gaze into mine, something pressing, searching, and unclean. It annoyed me, and when I am annoyed I generally become more direct than polite.

So I began to question him. I asked him what he meant by coming to me in the morning, by writing Marjorie Lindon's name before me, and by leaving behind that drawing of the beetle which had so nearly thrown Paul Lessingham into collapse. He denied knowledge with the smoothness of a practised liar. He said he knew nothing of any beetle, nothing of any paper, and nothing of Paul Lessingham's fear.

I did not believe him for an instant. Indeed, the more he denied, the clearer it became to me that the very point I had touched was the one he most wished hidden. There are lies which are strong because they are quiet, but there are others which tremble as they are spoken. His belonged to the second kind.

Since plain questions failed, I tried another language. In the laboratory I had means of making visible displays of force, electrical effects which, though harmless enough when rightly handled, are trying to nerves which are already uneasy. I set part of the apparatus in motion, and the room was alive at once with sparks and blue light and sharp crackling sounds.

The change in him was immediate. He tried to stand with dignity, and once he even drew himself up and said, "I am a child of Isis," as if the words themselves should protect him. But the electricity disturbed him deeply. His eyes went again and again to the moving light, and his body showed what his pride wished to hide. For all his powers, there was at least one thing in heaven or earth of which he was afraid.

I pressed him harder then. I told him that he would answer my questions or

face more of the same treatment. He still tried to evade me, but his self-command was breaking. In his excitement he began to speak wildly, at one moment with pride, at another with fury, and all the while with that strange mixture of malice and passion which seemed to colour every thought he had about Lessingham.

Then came one of the most astonishing moments of my life. In the midst of the struggle, confusion, and movement, the wrappings and loose garments about the creature shifted, fell apart, and revealed a truth which turned my thoughts upside down. The being with whom I had been dealing as a man was not a man at all, but a woman.

Nor was she, if one judged by the body so suddenly shown, either old or ill-shaped. The face had lied, or the form had changed, or else nature had done some work stranger than any I had seen in all my years among chemical and physical marvels. For a second or two I could only stare. My reason did not leave me, but it certainly reeled.

She used my amazement better than I did. Stooping, she caught up what draperies she could, flung them about her anyhow, and darted for the door into the yard. I sprang after her and shouted for her to stop, but she was too quick. By the time I had reached the yard she was gone, and though I thought I saw some dim form passing the farther wall, when I climbed up and looked about there was no one anywhere to be seen.

The neighbourhood lay still under the night as if nothing strange had happened there at all. I listened for retreating steps and heard none. So I went back across the yard in a condition which was half anger, half wonder, and wholly beyond comfort. Percy had by then awakened enough to sit up and complain of headache. I got him inside again, and I shut and locked and barred the place as if bolts and wood could keep out the kind of thing that had just slipped through my fingers.

I had hardly begun to put my mind together when a fresh surprise met me. Dora Grayling stood in the doorway. She said she had told the servant not to trouble to show her in, and that she had come without her aunt. She was bright, smiling, and perfectly at ease, while I, after what had just happened, was in no fit state for visitors and least of all for cheerful ones.

I dare say my manner was none too civil. Dora saw it at once, and instead of shrinking from it, she gave me battle. She told me, with more spirit than I had expected from her, that I was always ready to treat her as if she were a child or a fool, though she came as a friend and wished to be useful to me. When I tried to turn the matter off, she only grew warmer and said that if I spoke of being friendless while pushing away honest friendship, then I was unjust as well as rude.

That brought me up short. There are some rebukes which anger a man, and there are others which go straight to the truth of him. Hers was of the second kind. When I saw how real her feeling was, and how sincerely she cared not only for me but even for my work, my tone changed in spite of myself.

I asked if she truly meant that she took an interest in my inventions and experiments. She answered with a face so full of warmth that no doubt was possible. Then, moved more than I chose to show, I asked if she and her aunt would come to the laboratory the next morning. I said I would show them everything worth showing, and if, after that, she still wished to help in the South American matter we had spoken of, I would accept her offer and we would be partners.

She agreed at once, and agreed gladly. There was something almost touching in the pleasure she took from so small a victory. After the beetle woman's flight, the lies, the mystery, the poisonous vapour, and all the rest, Dora's simple goodwill came upon me like a gust of clean air through a poisoned room. Yet even while I spoke with her, I could not wholly put aside the thought that somewhere out in the darkness, not far away perhaps, the strange creature who called herself a child of Isis was still free.

Part 10

The next important visitor was Mr Lindon, and he came to me in a state of heat and importance which made his purpose clear before he had fully opened his mouth. He asked for a private word, and I took him into the laboratory, though I do not usually bring anyone there. The moment he was inside, he began wiping

his brow and speaking as if the fate of empires depended on his next sentence.

He said that he had always looked on me almost as a son, and as a sensible man from whom good advice might be had in a domestic crisis. I thanked him as politely as I could. Then he came to the point at last and asked what I knew of Paul Lessingham.

I answered that I knew what the whole world knew. That did not please him at all. He burst out at once against Lessingham as a political adventurer, a man of no family that anyone could name, and a fellow whose success had come too quickly to be respectable.

He could not bear that Marjorie should care for such a man. He said she was the representative of the Lindons and must marry in a way that suited the family and the property. In his view, she might marry almost anyone of position and still do herself honour, but to marry Lessingham would be beneath her and insulting to him.

Then he told me what had happened after they returned home from the House. He had forbidden her to speak to Lessingham again, or even to notice him in the street. Instead of obeying, she had answered him clearly and coolly, and had let him know that she did not mean to end a friendship merely because of what she called his unreasonable prejudice.

He repeated her words with deep offence and no little amazement. To hear him tell it, Marjorie had nearly sent him to the devil in his own house. He asked me again what I truly knew against Lessingham. When I said that nothing definite seemed to be known against him, he took that not as a point in Lessingham's favour, but as proof that the man was a nobody who had risen from nowhere.

Then, all at once, he said the thing I had least expected to hear. He declared that he would ten times sooner Marjorie married me. I do not think he knew what those words did to me. For a moment my heart gave such a leap that I had to turn away, because if I had not, he might have read too much in my face.

I answered only that such an idea was out of the question. He stared and asked why. I could not tell him that I had already tried and failed. So I said as little as possible, and he, taking my silence for modesty or stubbornness, only pressed his

main point harder.

He wanted me to speak to Marjorie and turn her mind against Lessingham. He did not greatly care what words I used so long as I filled her with dislike of the man. In plain terms, he wanted me to “choke him off,” as he put it. I had not yet decided how I would answer that request when Edwards came in and said that Miss Lindon wished to see me at once.

The effect on her father was immediate. He was delighted. He told me to hide him behind the screen, let the girl speak freely, and then he would come out at the proper moment and between us we would manage her. The whole plan was absurd and shameful, and I tried to stop it, but before I could do so he had put himself out of sight, and Marjorie was already entering the room.

One glance at her face showed me that she had not come in any ordinary mood. The joy was gone out of it. She came to me at once and said that she was glad to see me, because she was in trouble, strange trouble. I asked her to come into the house where she might speak more quietly, but she refused and said that the laboratory was just the right place for such a tale, because it looked uncanny.

She was excited in a way I had never seen in her before. She asked if she was going mad and even held out her wrist for me to feel her pulse. It was racing. I gave her something of my own to steady her, and when she had drunk it, she began her story.

The night before, she said, her father had forbidden her to speak to Lessingham again. That had been unpleasant enough, but it was not the main thing. Earlier that morning, she had seen a crowd in the street and gone out to look. In the middle of the crowd lay a man in rags, almost naked, weak with hunger and shock, and she had had him taken into the house. When first she bent over him, he had cried out, in a strange hoarse voice, “Paul Lessingham,” and then, louder still, “Be warned, Paul Lessingham, be warned!”

She had taken him in, had him washed and put to bed, and had sent for the doctor. Later, after her quarrel with her father, she went to see him again. Then he half raised himself on the pillow and cried out once more, “Paul Lessingham! Beware! The Beetle!” At that, I confess, I was startled. I asked if she was sure

those were the very words, and she said she could hear them still in her ears.

She went on to say that after leaving his room, she had felt a dreadful certainty that some terrible danger was at that very moment threatening Lessingham. She knew how impossible that sounded, and she had tried to reason herself out of it, but the feeling remained. She could neither pray nor call for help nor even ring the bell. It was as if fear itself had taken hold of her body.

Then came the worst part of her story. When she was in bed, she became sure that some beetle-like thing was in the room, flying lower and lower over her. She hid herself under the clothes, but she could hear it on the coverlet. Then she felt it creeping into the bed toward her face. She said it had followed her, and when she lifted one finger and pointed, she whispered that it was there now.

At that exact moment there really was a droning sound in the room. I told her it was only a bee come through the open window, but she would not have it so. She clung to me and asked if I too did not feel that evil was present. Then she begged me to pray, because she said she could not pray herself.

So I did what she asked. I repeated the Lord's Prayer aloud, awkwardly enough, for it had been long since I had done such a thing. But as I spoke, her trembling lessened. By the end, she had sunk to her knees beside me, and we said the last words together, "Deliver us from evil."

Then, by chance, I looked up and saw old Lindon's face peering from behind the screen. The look on him was so full of shocked confusion that in another moment I might have laughed. But the whisper in which he asked if she was mad was loud enough for her to hear. She sprang up at once, saw him, and understood everything.

What followed was hard on all of us, but hardest on me. She turned first on her father and called his conduct by its right name. Then she turned on me and asked if I had known all along that there was a listener hidden in the room while she was opening her heart to me. I tried to explain that the trick was not mine and that I had tried to draw her elsewhere, but the explanation did not save me from her anger or, what was worse, her disappointment.

She became calm with a suddenness which was almost more painful than her

fear had been. Her father spluttered, demanded what all the talk of beetles meant, and pressed me to tell her that Lessingham was a scoundrel. I would not do it. Then Marjorie answered for herself. She said that Lessingham was a man of genius, honour, and high purpose, and that he had asked her to share his life's work and that she had agreed. With that, she said good-bye and left us both standing there.

After she was gone, Lindon blamed me for not helping him more, and I told him plainly that his way of fighting only drove her faster in the direction he feared. He asked again if she was mad, and I answered that she was not. Yet when he had left me too, I stood alone with a mind more troubled than before. For even if fear had made her vision worse, I could not believe that her terror had sprung from nothing. Somewhere behind her words, behind Holt's warning, behind Lessingham's own secret dread, there was a fact still hidden from us all.

Part 11

It was just after Marjorie had gone, and her father had gone too, that Paul Lessingham came. Mr Lindon had treated him with open rudeness on the steps, but Lessingham seemed to notice nothing at all. He merely waited until the older man was well away, then turned to me with that cool easy manner of his and asked if he might come in.

The sight of him stirred me at once. All that had happened during the last days came up together in my mind. Marjorie's love for him, her terror, Holt's warning, the strange Eastern woman, the beetle drawing, and the fear I had seen in Lessingham himself all pressed on me at once. So I led him straight into the laboratory, because there, if anywhere, we might come to plain speaking.

He looked about the room with calm curiosity, as if he had entered it only to pass the time in an agreeable way. Then he stooped and picked up a bright little purse from the floor, asking if it was mine. I told him it was not. In truth, I did not know if it belonged to Marjorie or Dora, and that small foolish object lying there seemed to make the whole room even stranger.

He sat down very quietly, crossed his legs, and folded his hands, then looked at me as if waiting to see what move I would make next. There was a sort of polished patience in him which I found more trying than open anger would have been. I knew that if anything real was to be said, I would have to force it.

So I began at once. I told him that I knew he had made serious advances to Marjorie Lindon and that, because of my long connection with her family, I had a right to speak. I said that if I believed he could make her happy, I would wish him well with all my heart. But before I could do that, I must know what dark thing in his life had made him live in such dreadful fear.

He did not answer the question directly. Instead, he asked me to explain myself, as if he had no idea what I meant. That coolness angered me, and I said that no explanation was needed, because he knew perfectly well. I told him that before any man married Marjorie, his past must bear examination, and that I did not believe his could.

Even then he kept his command of himself better than I did. He said that every man has things in his past which he keeps to himself. That was true enough, and because it was true, it struck me. But I answered that there are limits, and that when a man is haunted as he was haunted, one cannot pretend the matter is small.

Then he rose and moved away a little, asking in a light tone about some apparatus on the shelf, as if we were speaking of nothing more serious than machinery. That angered me still more. I told him that I was in no mood to be put off by clever words or graceful movements. He replied that among the ancients there had been stranger knowledge than ours, and then, in the same breath, spoke of seeing something like the apotheosis of the beetle with his own eyes.

When he said that, I felt that we had at last reached the true ground beneath our feet. I told him that I knew he had some Eastern enemy or follower or tormentor who was mixed up in the whole affair. He tried to deny it, but his denial had no strength in it. Indeed, the more I pressed him, the clearer it became that I was striking exactly where the wound lay.

I told him then, more plainly than before, that unless he could satisfy me, he must give up all thought of marrying Marjorie. I said that there was something

unhealthy about him, something out of the common order of life, and that if he would not explain himself, I would speak of certain facts to Marjorie and, if needed, to the world. It was a harsh threat, but I meant it.

At first he met even that with a smile and a kind of pale courage. But when I spoke of the man who had come half naked out of his house at night, and then of the Eastern figure who seemed to haunt him, and finally of the beetle drawing which had thrown him into panic, his face changed. I saw then that beneath all his public strength there lived a private terror which never slept very far away.

To force him farther, I used a chance phrase. I said that perhaps the picture had been sent by "the Lord of the Beetle." The effect was immediate. He faltered, and for the first time I felt that he was truly near breaking. He tried to recover himself and spoke of delusions, of overwork, of strange mental states, as if he wished to put the whole matter into the language of illness.

I did not let him hide there. I asked again if he were mad, or haunted, or guilty of something which placed him outside decent human life. Then, all at once, the struggle in him ended. He gave a shiver from head to foot, staggered, turned white as paper, and cried out that yes, God knew it was true, he was haunted.

What followed was ugly to see. He collapsed on the floor like a man whose bones had gone out of him. He held up his hands and made sounds which belonged less to reason than to animal fear. I had seen men in bad states before, but there was something especially dreadful in watching so strong and public a figure fall into such complete helplessness.

I gave him brandy and forced him to drink. By degrees he came back to himself, though the smile which returned to his lips was ghastly and looked more like pain than recovery. Then he asked me again about the Eastern being I had mentioned. I told him that the face and voice seemed those of a man, but that the body, so far as I had seen it, was a woman's.

He listened with half-closed eyes and then began speaking in a low strained way about witchcraft, about Obi, and about men who can force others to see what they choose. He asked if such things were possible. I told him that I would neither say yes nor no. In truth, by then I had seen too much to laugh easily at old dark

beliefs.

At last he spoke more openly. He said that when he was younger he had suffered from a similar haunting, that it had disappeared for years, and that he had believed himself free of it forever. Now it had come back. He said that if it proved likely to continue, he would never join Marjorie's life to his, not for anything the world could give him.

I made him promise more than that. I told him that before leaving the room he must give me his word that he would, for the present, hold himself no more than an acquaintance to Miss Lindon. He answered that he would do so while he made inquiries into the cause of this return. He asked only that I judge him less harshly until the whole truth was known.

There was something in his sadness then which moved me against my will. I could see that whatever lay behind the affair was not some small shame but a great misery. Yet pity was not enough to make me trust him with Marjorie. So I accepted his promise, but I did not soften in my main purpose.

He turned then as if to go, but before he reached the door a droning sound came into the room. I heard it too. It was exactly like the sound Marjorie had spoken of, the sound she had feared in the night. The instant it touched his ears, his face altered again in a way which would have been almost laughable if it had not been so pitiable.

He gripped my arm so hard that it hurt. He asked for more brandy and swallowed it quickly. Only when the droning had ceased did his hold loosen. Then he said that when a man must use alcohol to keep his courage up, things are in a bad way indeed, and that I had never known what it is to expect at any moment a private meeting with the devil.

This time he truly left. I heard his steps go down the passage and the front door close behind him. I sat where I was and tried to think the whole thing through, but thought did not move easily. The man was either under some monstrous deception or under some monstrous power. I could not yet say which.

A few minutes later, while I still sat there, a sheet of paper came fluttering in through the open window and fell near my feet. I picked it up. On it was a picture

of a beetle, the same kind of beetle which had so shaken Paul Lessingham the day before. Before I had time to do more than stare, I heard someone coming along the corridor.

I looked up, expecting Lessingham back again, but instead it was Dora Grayling standing in the doorway with red cheeks and a shy brightness in her face. She said she had come for the purse she had left behind and, after a little pause, added that she wanted me to come and lunch with her. I locked the beetle picture away in a drawer, and I went with Dora.

Part 12

I am the happiest woman in the world. I know many women must have said those same words before me, but I cannot help saying them too. Paul Lessingham has told me that he loves me. I think I have loved him for much longer than I understood.

The beginning of it now seems almost funny. I first felt drawn to him after reading one of his speeches in the newspaper. Papa hated that speech and said very hard things about the man who made it. Because he spoke so strongly against Paul, I read the speech for myself, and when I had finished, I was deeply moved.

In those words I found kindness, understanding, and a real wish to help other people. After that, I read everything by Paul that I could find. The more I read, the more I admired him. Papa, of course, never tried to help us meet.

To papa, Paul's very name was like a red cloth before a bull. But in time we did meet, and then I found that the man was even finer than the printed words. That does not often happen. So many people seem greater at a distance than they do near at hand. With Paul, the opposite was true.

After our first meeting, we seemed always to meet again. At first I called it chance, but later I began to think that chance alone could not explain it. We met in drawing rooms, on public occasions, in houses where neither of us had expected the other. It was as if our days kept bending toward each other.

At first I told myself that we were only friends. He often said that he spoke to

me as to a friend, and with him those words were never empty. He was not one of those men who say the same sweet thing to every woman who will listen. He spoke carefully, and when he trusted me, I knew that the trust was real.

He told me about his hopes, his plans, and the work he wished to do for his country. He spoke not like a man hungry for fame, but like a man who wanted to use his strength well. That was one of the things I loved in him before I knew that I loved him. He seemed to live for something larger than himself.

At last came the evening when all changed. We had both spoken at a meeting for working women in Westminster. That alone would have shocked papa if he had known it. Afterward, Paul asked me to walk with him as far as the House, and then he said he would put me in a cab.

We walked together through the evening streets and talked at first only of politics. He was speaking about a bill before Parliament and about the duty he felt to resist certain changes to it. Then, quite suddenly, he stopped and asked how I truly felt when he and papa stood on opposite sides in public questions.

I answered as I had always felt. Papa the father was one person to me, and papa the politician was another. I loved my father dearly, but I could not promise to think him right in every public matter simply because he was my father. Paul listened very closely, and I felt that something serious was near.

By the time we reached Westminster Bridge, the river lay dark below us and the lights moved over it in long shining lines. We stood there side by side, and after a little silence he asked if marriage would change my opinions. I asked if it would change his. He said that depended.

Then he came nearer and asked if I would marry him. I do not think I breathed for a moment after hearing those words. My whole heart seemed to open at once, and I knew, with a certainty beyond all doubt, that what I had called friendship was love. When he said that he loved me, the world itself seemed changed.

I could hardly speak. I think my silence frightened him for an instant, because he asked if he had offended me. But my voice, when it came, said no, and I believe he understood the trembling in it. After that, very little needed to be said, because our happiness spoke for us.

We stayed there much longer than either of us knew. When Paul at last looked up at the great clock and saw that it was midnight, he was astonished. Two hours had passed like ten minutes. He put me in a cab, rode home with me, and before we reached the door, he kissed me. I was so full of feeling that, to my shame, I cried, and he had to comfort me all the way.

Since then, another difficulty has come. Sydney Atherton has asked me to be his wife, and the whole thing is not only troublesome but absurd. The trouble began because Paul wished our engagement to remain secret for a little while. He feared papa's anger, not in any cowardly way, but because the political air was already full of quarrels and strain.

The session was hard on him, and I could see that he was overtired. He worked too much, slept too little, and carried more than one man should carry alone. So he wished to wait until the House had risen before our engagement was made known. I saw the wisdom in it, though it was not easy for me.

At home the air felt almost as charged as it did in Parliament. Papa was always restless and suspicious whenever Paul's name came near him. He had not actually forbidden me to speak to Paul, but he said enough sharp and ugly things to make his feelings plain. For the most part, I bore it in silence, though I longed for the whole truth to be out.

I am not ashamed of loving Paul. On the contrary, I am proud of it. Many times I have felt that I could gladly stand before papa and defend my choice to the end. But because Paul wished silence, I kept silence too. That concealment, however, had one foolish result. Sydney Atherton, of all men, made me an offer of marriage.

I have known Sydney all my life, and I have always thought of him as a kind of brother. He is clever almost beyond belief, and in some things he is a genius. Yet he is also wild, uneven, and often very foolish in his way of speaking and acting. He can hide what most men would boast of, and boast of what most men would hide.

As for his loving me, I cannot take it seriously. It seems to me that he is as much in love with me as he is with the moon. Some other girl must have crossed him, and in one of his storms he turned his heart in the wrong direction. The

woman he ought to marry, and I believe one day will marry, is Dora Grayling.

Dora is sweet, rich, beautiful, and plainly devoted to him. He is often rude to her, which is one of the strongest signs that he likes her more than he knows. Sydney has that odd way with women. Also, he has remarkable eyes, and people say he has unusual power over others. I sometimes joke that he has half hypnotised poor Dora already.

Still, for all that, he makes an excellent brother. I have often gone to him for help, and he has often given good advice. There are small matters, even matters of dress and ribbons, on which Paul is too great and serious a man to speak much, but Sydney can discuss them with perfect ease and real skill. If he had been a dressmaker instead of an inventor, I believe he would have been a magnificent one.

Part 13

This morning I had a strange little adventure, though at the time I did not know how important it would become. I was in the breakfast room, and papa, as usual, was late. While I was wondering whether I should begin without him, I happened to look out of the window and saw a small crowd in the street. The people were gathered in a ring, staring down at something on the ground.

Peter, the butler, was in the room, so I sent him to see what the matter was. He returned with one of his large and careful answers, saying that an unfortunate person appeared to have suffered some kind of accident, and that he had been told the man was either dead or drunk. That did not satisfy me in the least. So, though it was neither wise nor proper, I went out myself to see.

The road was still dirty from the rain in the night, and I had not put on shoes fit for mud. Even so, I pushed through the little crowd and reached the middle. There on the ground lay a man in such misery that at first he hardly seemed like a man at all. He was covered with dirt, almost naked, and so weak and still that the policeman kneeling by him did not know whether he was pretending, dead, or in some strange fit.

I touched his hand and found it icy cold. There seemed to be hardly any pulse in the wrist, if indeed there was one. I told the policeman that this was no ordinary case of drunkenness and that a doctor ought to be sent for at once. Before more could be done, the man suddenly sat up in the mud, opened his eyes wide, stretched out his hands, and cried in a rough terrible voice, “Paul Lessingham!”

I was so startled that I nearly fell where I stood. To hear Paul’s name spoken like that, by such a creature and in such a place, shook me more than I can say. The man dropped back again at once as if the life had gone out of him. Then, after a moment, he rose up once more with a kind of convulsion and cried more loudly still, “Be warned, Paul Lessingham, be warned!”

That decided me. There was some mystery here, and I felt at once that I must learn what it was. I sent at once for Dr Cotes and ordered that the poor man should be carried into the house. There were willing hands enough among the onlookers, and in a very short time he was indoors, while I made sure that papa, who was breakfasting upstairs and feeling what he called gout, should hear nothing of it unless he asked directly.

Dr Cotes came almost as soon as the man reached the bedroom. He looked at him, examined him, and declared that if he did not soon get food he would die of starvation. As for the strange condition in which he kept sinking and rising again, the doctor would not commit himself to a plain opinion. He spoke of catalepsy and of not knowing yet what the case truly was, which was not very helpful, though no doubt it was honest.

Since there was nothing more to be learned at once, I went upstairs to papa. I said nothing to him then of the man from the street, because the smallest thing irritates him when he believes himself unwell. So the morning passed. But the image of that poor broken creature, and even more the sound of his voice speaking Paul’s name, stayed with me all through the day.

By evening there had been other troubles. Paul was expected to speak in the House, and of course I went to hear him. Sydney Atherton was there too, and behaved in his usual foolish way, full of sneers and little stings. That would have been tiresome enough by itself, but papa made matters much worse by arriving

and trying, almost openly, to draw me away from Paul as if I were a child to be ordered about in public. I went down with Paul to the carriage all the same, and left papa to follow in whatever humour he chose.

Papa reached home almost as soon as I did, and then the battle began in earnest. It is impossible to describe him fairly when he is in a rage. He loses all proportion, all dignity, and almost all sense. He began by speaking of Paul in a way which no gentleman ought to use of any man in the hearing of a woman, least of all in the hearing of his own daughter.

I bore it for a little while. Then, because I would not promise at once never to see or speak to Paul Lessingham again, he grew more violent. He declared that Paul was unfit for me, unfit for decent society, unfit for anything but his own ambition. I answered that papa's dislike did not prove guilt in another man, and that if he could praise Lord Cantilever for very small merits, I could surely admire Paul Lessingham for very real gifts.

That did it. Papa became almost beside himself. He spluttered at the very idea that Lord Cantilever should be named in the same hour with Paul, and the more I defended Paul's ability, the more furious he became. He could not bear that I should admire in another man what he denied even when he plainly saw it.

Then came threats. He demanded that I give him my word to hold no more communication with Mr Lessingham. I refused, quietly but completely. I would not bind myself to such a promise, because I knew it to be unjust, and because in my heart I had already given myself elsewhere.

After that he said all sorts of cruel and wild things. He spoke as if I were some wicked daughter leading myself toward disgrace, prison, and ruin. He called me names which I shall not repeat, because I cannot bear even to remember them from my father's lips. It was not merely anger. It was a kind of blind violent pride, wounded because I had chosen against his will.

I do not pretend that I was meek. I answered him as firmly as I could, though perhaps not as gently as I should. But there are moments when gentleness only feeds tyranny. I felt that if I gave way an inch from fear, he would take a mile in the name of fatherly duty.

At last the whole miserable scene ended with his driving me from the room in what can only be called a storm of curses and angry cries. I went out shaken, tired, and heartsick, yet not conquered. For all papa's rage, one thing in me stood firm. Whatever troubles were gathering round Paul Lessingham, and whatever strange shadow had entered my day through the man from the street, I knew more clearly than ever that I must now act for myself.

Part 14

When papa had driven me from him, I went at once to the man from the street. It was late, and I was tired and shaken, yet I could not go to bed without seeing him. In some strange way he seemed to stand between Paul and me, like a dark sign set in our path. Since he had spoken Paul's name with such dreadful force, I felt that I must know how he was.

The nurse met me at the door. She was a good kind woman, round and motherly, and not easily frightened by illness. Even she looked troubled. She said that the patient had not moved since she came, that he did not seem to breathe, and that she could find no pulse, though the doctor insisted he was still alive.

I went farther into the room, and as soon as I approached the bed, the man stirred. He raised himself suddenly, just as he had done in the street that morning. Looking before him as if he saw someone standing there, he cried out in a voice full of more than human pain, "Paul Lessingham! Beware! The Beetle!"

The effect on me was immediate and terrible. I had not the least clear idea what he meant, but those words seemed to strike some hidden place in my mind and fill it with horror. My knees trembled under me. It was as if, all at once, I stood in the presence of something dreadful and unseen.

As for the poor man, the moment he had spoken, he fell back again into that same trance-like state. The nurse bent over him and declared that he had "gone off" once more. She said she had never in all her experience seen anything so unnatural, and that by all appearance he might almost as well have been dead.

Then she looked at me and saw that something had happened to me also. I

suppose my face must have changed strangely, because she asked at once what was the matter and said I looked quite ill. I could hardly answer. My tongue seemed thick and useless in my mouth, and I told her only that I felt unwell and had better go to bed.

When I left the room, I had the dreadful feeling that something left it with me. It seemed to come out after me into the corridor so closely that I shrank against the wall as if expecting a blow. I cannot explain such a sensation. I only know that it was real to me then, and that it made me feel more helpless than any bodily pain could have done.

Somehow I got to my bedroom. Fanchette was waiting there, and for one instant the sight of her was a comfort. Then I saw the surprise in her face, and shame returned. I did not want even my maid to see me behave like a frightened child, so I told her I was merely tired and would undress myself.

Yet even while I said the words, I longed to ask her to stay. Something seemed to pass through the air and brush my cheek, and I caught her arm in terror and asked if there was something with us in the room. She looked startled, and no wonder. At once I was ashamed again, and I sent her away.

The instant she had gone, I wished her back. A fear beyond reason came over me so strongly that I could hardly stand. I had never thought myself cowardly, nor one of those women who tremble at shadows, and I tried to scold myself into sense. But the effort only made matters worse.

I became convinced that there truly was something in the room with me, some invisible horror which at any moment might become visible. More than that, I felt that what was with me was also with Paul. It seemed to me that we were somehow joined by one common terror, and that at that very moment he too was suffering under the same dreadful threat. I saw him in my mind with shocking clearness, crouching on the floor, hiding his face, and crying out.

At last I screamed his name aloud, and with that cry the vision faded. I knew then that I was standing in my own room with all the lights on and that I had not yet even begun to undress. Yet the return of plain reality did not comfort me much. I began to wonder if I were going mad.

Then I heard behind me a low buzzing sound. When I turned, it moved with me and stayed behind me still. I turned again and again, quickly and wildly, but I could not catch sight of what made it. I could only hear it, and as I listened, a dreadful thought came into my mind. It sounded like a bee, but could it be a beetle?

I have always had a horror of beetles. Other women may hate mice or snakes or spiders. I do not mind such things very much, but a beetle has always been my own special terror. The thought that a great flying beetle might be in my bedroom was almost more than I could bear.

I sprang and twisted about the room like a foolish creature, trying to see it, but the sound always stayed behind me. At last, in desperation, I threw myself by the bed and tried to pray. But I could not form the words. I felt that if only I could truly pray, the evil would go from me, yet my mind and tongue both failed.

Then I tore off my clothes in a kind of frenzy. I had worn a beautiful dress that night, a new one made specially for the Duchess's ball and, in my own heart, for Paul's great speech. Under ordinary conditions I should have treated it with the greatest care. In that madness of fear I pulled it off and flung it to the floor with everything else.

I sprang into bed, turned off the electric light, and hid myself beneath the sheets from head to foot. I had hoped that darkness might quiet me, but it did the opposite. The moment the room was dark, the buzzing seemed nearer and clearer than before, and soon I felt something alight upon the coverlet above me.

It rested there for a moment, and then began to move with slow uneven steps toward my head. I lay still, unable to stir, full of such horror that no words can describe it. When it reached the top of the bed, it began to creep inside, between the sheets, and I felt it come nearer and nearer until something touched my hair. After that, mercifully, I knew no more, because I fainted.

When I came back to consciousness the next morning, it was nearly nine o'clock, and I was sitting up in bed trembling like a child. I do not think I had truly slept at all. I felt sick, weak, and wretched, but my mind was clear enough for one decision. I would go to Sydney Atherton and tell him everything.

I did so, and there I had a fresh shock. He heard my whole story with what seemed sympathy enough, and then I discovered that papa had been hidden behind a screen, listening to every word. I told them both exactly what I thought of such behaviour, and I left them, I hope, feeling ashamed. Strange as it may seem, that discovery had one good effect on me. It braced me, and made me feel that if help was to come, I must actively seek it.

So when I returned home and learned that the man from the street was at last fully conscious, I went to him at once. He was pitiful to see, pale, weak, worn almost to a shadow, with the tears running down his face when he tried to thank me. Yet his voice, though faint at first, was the voice of an educated man, and as he gathered strength, he told his story with such plain directness that I could not doubt his honesty.

The tale he told was the strangest I had ever heard. He spoke of hunger, rain, and a workhouse door shut in his face, then of an open window in a lonely house, and after that of a dreadful creature, not fully man and perhaps not man at all, who had taken hold of his weakened mind. He said that this creature hated Paul Lessingham with a wild and personal hatred, and had forced him, Robert Holt, to go almost naked through the night and commit burglary in Paul's house.

He told how Paul had come upon him in the very act, and how the mere mention of a mysterious beetle had struck all strength out of him and allowed the burglar to escape. Even after all I had seen and felt, the tale sounded scarcely believable. Yet Holt spoke like a truthful man, and the fear in his memory was too real to be made up. It seemed to me that moments had become precious, and that if there was indeed such a danger over Paul, I could not hope to face it alone.

So I sent for Sydney again, in spite of the trick he and papa had played me only a short while before. By good luck he came almost at once. I received him in my own room and told him plainly that I wanted him to go to Holt and hear the story for himself. He answered lightly, as usual, but I warned him that this time I meant to test whether the feeling he always pretended to have for me was more than words.

He came with me, and the instant he saw Holt, he gave a little whistle and said,

“So! It’s you!” That astonished me at once. When I asked if he knew the man, he answered in his provoking way that he had met him before, on the street, the previous night. Then, before Holt began, Sydney asked if I would let him speak to the man in private, which naturally I refused.

So Holt told his story again, this time in a more orderly fashion than before. Sydney sat on the side of the bed and listened with those sharp eyes of his fixed on the speaker. The more I watched him, the more certain I became that he knew more of the matter than he wished me to know. When Holt finished, I accused Sydney of having heard the story already, perhaps even from Paul himself, but he denied it, and with him denial and truth do not always go together.

Then he began to question Holt in his dry half-mocking style. He asked whether this dreadful being had truly been a man. Holt answered that he was not sure at all. In fact, he said more than once he had thought it might be a woman, though there had been little enough in the face to suggest anything womanly. At that answer, something in Sydney’s expression told me that he had heard exactly what he expected to hear.

Part 15

We set out in a four-wheeled cab, and from the first moment it was not a cheerful drive. Mr Holt looked as if the clothes he wore belonged to another person and had only been hung upon him for want of a better use. He was so thin, so worn, and so white that I felt half ashamed of having helped to take him from his bed. I had made sure that he ate before we left, and I had brought brandy in case he fainted on the road, yet even then he looked more fit for a sickroom than for an expedition.

Sydney, on his side, behaved in a way which vexed me. He seemed determined to treat me like a foolish child whom he must protect against her own wishes. Since I would not bear that meekly, I answered him as coolly as I could, and so very little pleasant conversation passed between us. Most of what was said was addressed to Mr Holt, who sat between us in miserable silence.

At last the cab stopped. Sydney put his head out and discovered that we were at the wrong part of the workhouse. Then we drove to the casual ward, and there Mr Holt was more certain of the place. From that point he guided us as best he could through the district, though even then he seemed confused by daylight and by our coming from another direction than his own. Still, after a while he knew enough to bring us where he wished.

The house, when we reached it, looked no better by day than I had expected from his story. It stood in a poor unfinished road like a place which had been begun and then forgotten. There was no sign of life at the front. Sydney knocked and knocked again, each time more loudly, but no one answered.

Mr Holt grew more uneasy with every moment. He said more than once that someone might be inside and still refuse to answer. His voice had altered and had become thin and trembling, so that I hardly liked to hear it. Sydney, however, either did not notice this or chose not to show that he noticed it.

Since nothing came of the front door, we went round to the back. There the place looked even more deserted than before. The rooms we could see were bare and dirty, without furniture and without any sign that any person had recently lived in them. Sydney made a jest of it, saying that the place looked as if no one had ever lived there at all.

Yet Mr Holt insisted that only the front room had been furnished when he entered by night. Sydney tried the back door, knocked on the glass, and shook the handle, but no one came. Then, with the air of a man who has decided that legality has had its chance, he forced the catch of the window with his knife and raised the sash.

He proposed that he and Mr Holt should go in first and afterward open the door for me. But I knew him too well to trust that arrangement. I was perfectly certain that if I let the two men disappear into the house without me, they would search every corner before I was admitted. So I followed Sydney through the window at once, and Mr Holt came in after me.

Once inside, Sydney shouted through the empty rooms, asking if there was anyone in the house who would kindly show himself. His voice echoed in a very

uncomfortable way, making the emptiness seem larger and stranger. No answer came. Then he turned on Mr Holt and asked what on earth was the matter with him.

There was indeed something very wrong. Mr Holt was trembling from head to foot as though every nerve in him had begun to shake at once. He declared that it was nothing, but no one looking at him could have believed him. We went from the back part of the house toward the front room, and there his condition grew worse.

He stood framed in the doorway while Sydney moved toward him. Suddenly he seemed seized by a sort of convulsion and had to lean against the door to keep from falling. Then, as quickly as it had come, the spasm passed, and he became rigid instead, with his head thrown back, his eyes lifted, and his whole body held as if every power in him were straining to listen to some far-off call.

The sight was dreadful. I had never seen anyone look so completely cut off from common human feeling. Then he cried, in a strange thin voice unlike his own, “I hear! I come!” He spoke as if he were answering someone at a great distance, someone neither Sydney nor I could hear.

Before we could stop him, he turned and walked down the passage to the front door. Sydney ran after him and caught him on the step, asking where he thought he was going. Mr Holt did not even look round. He only said, still in that same faraway tone, “I am going to him. He calls me.”

Sydney asked who called him, and Mr Holt answered, “The Lord of the Beetle.” Then he seemed almost to slip from Sydney’s grasp and moved away down the road by which we had come. Sydney stood for a moment in a very awkward state of mind. He plainly saw that Holt might be leading us straight to the person we sought. But he also feared, and with reason, that the whole thing might be some trick to draw us from the house.

I knew very well what Sydney wished. He wished to keep me safe while he himself decided what was best. But by then I was past accepting such management from him. I told him plainly that if he meant to follow Holt, then he must do it at once, and that I would not leave the house till I had learned what I could. He

argued, warned, and grew impatient, but argument only made me more resolved.

At last he gave way, though with very bad grace. He left me in the front room, saying that he would send back the first sane creature he met to stay with me. He had a revolver, and I had my courage, which at that moment I believed enough. Then he hurried after Holt, and I heard his steps go quickly down the road until the house seemed to swallow every sound again.

For a little while I stood where he had left me and tried to command myself. The room looked strange enough even by day. There was a kind of Eastern richness in what remained there then, and yet under it all there was dirt, disorder, and something stale in the air which made the place feel less like a room than like a trap. I told myself that daylight made nonsense of fear, but my heart did not agree.

The stillness soon began to weigh on me. It was not the ordinary silence of an empty house. It felt, if I can explain it so, like a silence full of listening. More than once I turned suddenly, certain that someone had moved close behind me, but each time I saw nothing.

Then the same dreadful sensation returned which had mastered me the night before in my own bedroom. It was not exactly that I saw anything. It was rather that I knew, with that unreasonable certainty which is stronger than sight, that I was no longer alone. Something evil was near me and had been near me for some time.

I tried to hold fast to my reason. I crossed the room once or twice. I think I even spoke aloud, if only to make a human sound in that hateful place. But all the while the feeling deepened. It was as if some influence in the air itself was drawing the strength out of my limbs and the freedom out of my will.

After that my recollection becomes broken. I remember a kind of droning in my ears, not loud, yet impossible to ignore. I remember trying to move toward the door and feeling that my feet would not serve me honestly. I remember, too, a horrible certainty that the thing which had frightened me in darkness before had now come upon me in the full light of day.

Whether I truly saw the creature then, I cannot say with confidence. I think I

did. I think I saw something unnatural and hateful before me, something half man and half mockery, with eyes which seemed to take hold of my very thoughts. But that memory is mixed with such terror that I dare not swear exactly to the form.

What I know is this. From a certain moment I ceased to be mistress of myself. I was conscious, yet not free. I wished to cry out, to run, to fight, but the wish did not pass into action. Some stronger will had come over mine, and under it I was no better than a person walking in sleep.

I have dim recollections of passing from one room to another under that dreadful compulsion. I remember that at one point something slipped from my hand or from my finger into the passage, yet I neither stooped nor tried to recover it. I remember also a strange cold shame, as if things were being done to me which even in memory I shrink from naming plainly.

Beyond that, there are only fragments. A sense of being touched and handled as if I were a doll. A feeling about my hair which still pains me to think of. The horror of knowing that my own body no longer obeyed my own spirit. And through all, the same evil command which left no room for refusal.

When next the world grew a little clearer to me, I was no longer the Marjorie Lindon who had entered that house. I had lost not only freedom, but even the outward signs by which I had known myself. I seemed to be moving forward under orders, dressed in vile clothes which were not a woman's, and going where I neither wished nor understood.

Of that last stage I can say very little more, because the terror and confusion of it blurred almost everything. I know only that the daylight itself had become part of the horror. Night at least allows one to blame shadows. But that day the evil was with me openly, under the sun, and there was no longer any comfort in telling myself that I had merely been afraid of the dark.

Part 16

On the afternoon of Friday, the second of June, I was in my office, entering notes in my case-book about another curious business, when my servant Andrews

brought me a card. On it was written the name “Mr Paul Lessingham.” Since Mr Lessingham was a man known to all the world, I was naturally familiar with his face, though until that moment I had never exchanged a word with him in private.

I told Andrews to show him in. Lessingham entered with the composed air of a man long used to public rooms and difficult meetings. He shook hands, mentioned that he had known my father, and then stood looking at me with a steady thoughtful expression, as if he wished to judge at once what sort of man I might be and whether I could be trusted with serious things.

I asked him to sit down and explain how I could be of service. He did sit, but for a little while he seemed unable to come directly to the point. That itself interested me, because when a public man of his type hesitates, it is often because the matter is not political at all, but private, painful, and difficult to put into words.

In time he began to speak more plainly. He referred to Sydney Atherton, and the moment he did so I saw that some personal trouble connected those two names more closely than ordinary rivalry or dislike could explain. According to him, Atherton had lately been in touch with some person connected with a dark passage in his own earlier life and had hinted that he might use what he knew, or thought he knew, in a way that would injure him with Miss Lindon.

Lessingham spoke of the danger in a sharper and more practical tone than any he had yet used. He believed there was then in London some emissary from an old den in Cairo, perhaps even the very “Woman of the Songs” herself. Whether the aim was simple revenge or some more complex cruelty, he could not yet say. But he was sure that mischief was intended, and he wished me to discover who this person was and where that person might be found.

I answered that if Atherton truly knew anything important, I believed I could get it from him more easily than another man might, because he and I had been friends for years. Lessingham seized on that point at once and urged me to go to Atherton without delay. There was in him, even then, the politician’s instinct for quick action. It was plain that whatever his courage in public life, in this private matter he was being driven hard by fear.

Before I could leave, however, he was obliged to explain more fully why the

matter had reached such a pitch. He admitted with visible discomfort that a half-clad stranger had broken into his study by night and smashed open his bureau. A packet of Miss Lindon's letters had been taken, and Lessingham feared that if the enemy behind the burglary had truly returned after all these years, those letters might be used to poison her mind against him, or even to work her more direct harm.

I asked how the burglar had escaped, and he answered that the man had fled through the drawing-room window and, once in the street, had run straight into Sydney Atherton's arms. Atherton, for reasons of his own, had not stopped him. Instead, he had come to the front door merely to announce what he had seen. That fact seemed to weigh heavily with Lessingham, and I understood then why Atherton's name had immediately enlivened him.

While he spoke, I watched him with some care. More than once, when the subject drew close to its heart, a marked change came over him. His face tightened, his eyes grew fixed, and his voice lost its smooth silver quality and turned dry and husky. He confessed, with obvious shame, that there were certain words he could neither say nor write, because they affected him like old spells in tales of witchcraft. Such an admission from such a man would have seemed ridiculous if his distress had not been so real.

Since he had now gone too far to retreat, I let him continue in his own way. He said that singularity did not alarm me because it was, in effect, my normal atmosphere. Then, with a sort of bitter reluctance, he warned me that I was about to hear the strangest chapter in his life, a chapter so astonishing that even he had often had to fit its parts together again and again in order to assure himself that it had truly happened.

He added that he was not by nature a communicative man and hated the spirit which drags private matters into the public eye. If he now spoke at all, it was only because an irresistible chain of events had forced him to make me his confidant. I told him, truthfully enough, that no one ever comes to a man in my profession until compulsion has already done most of the work for him. At that, a small wintry smile passed over his face, and at last he began the story itself.

He said that he was not yet forty and that the events in question had happened twenty years before, when he was still little more than a boy. His parents had died while he was young, leaving him unusually free for one of his age. Having no one to hold him to the safer road, he chose travel over university and, after some wandering, found himself in Egypt, recovering from a fever at Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo.

One evening, restless after illness and eager for something adventurous, he went alone into the native quarter of the city. He described youth very fairly when he said that at eighteen one is not always wise. He wandered into a narrow dirty street called the Rue de Rabagas, ill lit, twisting, and unpleasant enough by any honest standard, and there he might have passed on and remembered nothing if not for a sound which came from one of the houses as he went by.

The sound was music and singing. An open window stood on his right, covered by latticed blinds, and from behind those blinds came a girl's voice accompanied by an instrument like a guitar. He stopped and listened. The song, he said, was one then known all over Europe, and its sweetness, coming so unexpectedly out of that foul little street, struck him with great force.

When the song ended, curiosity mastered prudence. He moved one of the lattice blinds a little aside and looked in. Inside he found what seemed to be a sort of café of the kind common enough in certain Continental quarters, where women sing to attract customers. On a low platform sat three women, one still holding the instrument with which she had accompanied herself. In a corner an old woman sat knitting, like a silent keeper of the place.

The room was otherwise empty. Yet the moment he looked through the lattice, the three women on the platform raised their eyes and fixed them on his. Only the old woman with her knitting gave no sign that she knew he was there. Lessingham stopped at that point for a moment, and I could see from his face that memory had ceased to be a story and had become, once more, a place in which he was standing.

Part 17

Lessingham went on with his tale after the dreadful scene in Cairo. He said that he had no clear memory of how he got out of that place at all. He remembered only a wild escape through passages and halls, a desperate rush through the night, and then nothing more until he found himself lying in safety under another roof.

He had been found at dawn in a Cairo street, naked, broken, and almost dead, and had been taken in by an American missionary named Clements and his wife. From all appearances, he must have wandered for miles before collapsing. The kindness of that husband and wife, he said, had saved his life, and he spoke of them with more feeling than he had shown about anything else. Their goodness seemed to him one of the very few clean memories in the whole dark business.

Even after he was physically stronger, his mind remained in ruins for a long time. There were days when he could hardly speak and days when he could remember almost nothing, not even his own name. He was tormented by sights which were real enough to him, though no one else could see them, and these visitations threw him again and again into states of helpless terror.

He placed himself under the care of a specialist in diseases of the mind, but the treatment did little good. No one could explain what he saw or why he saw it. Yet as time passed, the attacks became less frequent, then rarer still, until at last he began to believe that he had returned to ordinary life and left the whole abomination behind him.

It was then, he said, that he gave himself to politics. Public life served him in two ways. It occupied his mind, and it also kept him always before the world, so that a private haunted existence of the old sort became less possible. From that time onward he had lived under constant public observation, and he had persuaded himself that the old horror had died.

There he ended, and for a few moments I sat without speaking. The story, taken altogether, was certainly remarkable, and from any other lips I might have dismissed it as the work of a diseased imagination. But the man before me was not by nature fanciful, and the marks of fear in him were too deep to be explained away by simple nerves. Even so, I had not yet entirely seen what practical use he meant me to make of the tale.

Before I could press him further, there came a sudden uproar in the outer office. Andrews was plainly trying to stop someone, and just as plainly failing. The next instant my door flew open with a crash, and Sydney Atherton burst in like a gust of wind, flushed, excited, and in that state of violent energy which with him often means that some real emergency is at hand.

He paid no attention at first to the fact that I already had a visitor. He shouted that I must come with him at once, waste no time in questions, put on my hat, and hear the explanation in the cab. When I attempted to interrupt him with some mild remark, he cut me short with his usual cheerful brutality and declared that every second lost might mean the difference between life and death.

At last I managed to direct his attention to Lessingham's presence. That changed matters, though not by much. Instead of lowering his tone, Atherton only turned his excitement in a new direction. He said that if what Lessingham had told me was true, and if the being who had returned really had Miss Lindon in its power, then the woman he loved stood in danger not only of a horrible death but of something even worse.

Lessingham, for his part, seemed startled less by Atherton's manner than by the substance of what he said. It was plain that he had not yet heard from Marjorie about the man found in the street, nor about her own movements later in the day. When Atherton saw that, he grew more impatient still and said there was no time for speeches, that we must all go at once, and that he would tell the story on the way if Lessingham chose to come too.

So in a very few moments I found myself leaving my office in company with the two most singularly agitated men who had ever crossed its floor. Lessingham's agitation was inward, rigid, and controlled only by force of habit. Atherton's was all movement, noise, sharp words, and flying elbows. Between the two of them, I had little doubt that the affair before us was no ordinary disappearance and no common lover's panic.

We hurried downstairs and made for the cab, Atherton urging speed at every step as if the horse might be persuaded to go faster by insult alone. Even before we were properly seated, he had begun again in broken explanations. From what

I gathered at once, Miss Lindon had joined him and Holt in the search for the house on the road from the workhouse, Holt had behaved in an extraordinary fashion there, Atherton had gone after him, and when he returned, Marjorie was gone.

Atherton still clung to one last hope, or at least tried to do so. He said it was possible that she had merely stepped out and returned by another way while he was absent. Yet even in saying it, he did not sound convinced. I could see that he had already begun to fear the worst and had come for me precisely because the thing he feared was not the sort of thing the police would easily understand.

Thus ended our talk in the office and began the rapid journey which was to carry us back toward the miserable little house at the centre of so much confusion. As I took my place between them, I felt that Lessingham's twenty-year-old nightmare had ceased to belong only to his past. It had risen again into the present, and now Marjorie Lindon seemed to have been drawn into it with all the helplessness of an innocent person stepping into deep water in the dark.

Part 18

Three men in one hansom cab can be uncomfortable at the best of times. With Sydney Atherton among them in a state of violent excitement, the thing became almost beyond bearing. He sat first on my knee, then on Lessingham's, then on no seat at all, because he kept jumping up and nearly throwing himself over the front. One moment he knocked off my hat, the next Lessingham's, and then his own, and when his hat rolled into the mud, he leaped into the road to recover it as if neither speed nor dignity mattered in the least.

All the while he talked without stopping. He spoke first to Lessingham, then to me, then to both of us together, thrusting an elbow into one of us whenever he turned. Out of this storm of words I had to gather the story as best I could, because in his agitation he told it in broken pieces and not in proper order.

It appeared that Marjorie had found in the street, outside her own home, the same miserable man whom Atherton had seen fleeing from Lessingham's house.

She had had him brought inside, and from his lips had learned enough to alarm her deeply about Lessingham's danger. Later she had brought Holt to Atherton, and after hearing the story, the three of them had gone together to the lonely house on the road from the workhouse.

There, according to Atherton, they had found the place silent and apparently empty. Holt had grown strange, had said that he heard some call, and had walked away in a trance-like state. Atherton had followed him, believing that in Holt's madness there might yet be a clue. When at last he gave up the chase and returned to the house, Marjorie was gone.

At this point Lessingham lost control of himself with an abruptness which showed how deeply the news struck him. He seized Atherton and shook him with a violence that sent the other man headlong to the floor of the cab. For one instant I thought the two would come to blows there and then in the street.

Yet Atherton, once on his feet again, seemed more impressed than offended. He even grinned and said that Lessingham had more strength in him than he had expected and was wasted in politics. Lessingham did not smile. He answered in a hard voice that if Marjorie were indeed in the power of the creature we all feared, then she was in danger of something worse than death.

That sobered Atherton, and after that the talk became more direct. He made us understand that there had been no sign of a struggle in the house, and that, when he returned after following Holt, everything was exactly as he had left it except that Marjorie was no longer there. He had found only one small object in the passage, a ring which Lessingham now carried.

So by the time we reached the neighbourhood, the position was plain enough, though no more hopeful for being plain. Marjorie had entered the house alive and in her own right mind. A little later Atherton had left her there alone for what he believed was only a few minutes. During that short interval, she had vanished as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed her.

We drew up before the little villa, and at once Atherton pointed to the front door with a sharp cry. When he had left, he declared, that door had stood wide open. Now it was shut. The change in so small a matter might mean much or little,

but at least it showed that since his departure some hand had been active there.

He knocked. No answer came. He knocked again, louder, while I questioned him as to every point I could think of. Was he certain he had left the door open. Was it still open when he returned from chasing Holt. Had he seen any mark of violence then. To all these questions he gave the same answer. He was certain. The door had been open. There had been no signs of any struggle. The place had seemed just as before, only without Marjorie.

Since the front remained silent, we went round to the back. There was no proper yard, almost no boundary of any sort, only waste ground lying about the place like a bad thought never properly finished. The kitchen window stood open, and through it Atherton entered first, with Lessingham and I close behind him.

We called aloud through the rooms, though without much expectation that anyone would answer. The house gave back only our own voices. Upstairs and down, all seemed empty. The poor furniture of the front room remained, but elsewhere there was little to suggest that any settled life had ever been led there. If the Arab, or woman, or whatever the creature truly was, had hidden itself there, it had done so with uncommon skill.

We searched room after room, and yet found nothing. More than once Atherton broke into angry exclamations against himself for having left Marjorie alone even for a minute. Lessingham said almost nothing. But the more silent he grew, the more dangerous the look in his face became. He moved like a man who expected at any moment to find either a beloved person or a horror too great to be spoken of.

At last it occurred to me that in such a house the best hidden place might be under our feet. I examined the front room more closely. Presently I noticed that one part of the floor differed slightly from the rest, and after some trouble we got at it. Beneath were hollow space and concealment enough for whatever the creature might wish to hide.

The first thing we found was a quantity of hair. There could be no doubt whose hair it was. It was Marjorie's, cut off from her head. Along with it were articles of woman's clothing which had plainly belonged to her, hidden away in haste yet not

without purpose. The sight of them in that hole was enough to turn the strongest man sick.

Atherton broke out at once into the darkest conclusion. He declared that the villain had murdered her, stuffed the body into some great bundle, and carried it away. In support of this ghastly theory he pointed to the fact that a policeman had seen the Arab travelling with a large bundle which he guarded with unusual care and would not allow to be placed out of his reach.

Lessingham, hearing this, covered his face with his hands and groaned aloud. For a moment the explanation seemed possible even to me. Yet the more I considered the facts, the less fully it satisfied me. There was something theatrical and too obvious about it, and the creature with whom we dealt had not yet shown itself simple in any of its devices.

So I said that I did not believe the bundle contained Miss Lindon, dead or alive. I believed it contained the Arab's own possessions and that those possessions were of such a nature that, had any ordinary man opened them and understood what he saw, he might well have gone mad from the sight. That answer offended Atherton, who wanted either a corpse or a clear enemy and had no patience with darker guesses.

But I went on. I said that Marjorie at that very moment was likely alive and somewhere else, clothed not in her own garments but in a filthy old suit of masculine rags, with boots, trousers, shirt, coat, and cap of the poorest kind. Both men stared at me in open disbelief. Yet the facts, I told them, pointed strongly that way.

A certain Miss Coleman, who lived opposite, had seen Marjorie return into the house. Very shortly after, she saw the blind lowered at the front window. Then, a little later, she saw a young man in the exact kind of ragged clothing I had described come walking out through the front door. I believed that supposed young man was Marjorie Lindon herself.

Atherton cried out that I was making her mad before I had found her. Lessingham said nothing, but his silence was full of horror. I answered that madness was not needed to explain it. Trance would do. The Arab had hidden

somewhere in the house, had sent Holt away under hypnotic command in order to draw Atherton after him, had revealed itself to Marjorie once the coast was clear, and had forced her to strip, cut off her hair, put on old male clothing, and walk away obedient to its will.

When I said that, neither man found words at once. The thing was so ugly that speech itself seemed poor beside it. Yet I could see that both believed me, because both had already seen enough of the Arab's power to know that such an outrage was horribly possible.

There was no use in lingering over the hole in the floor after that. We had learned what we could there, and what we had learned was bad enough. Marjorie was not dead in the house. She had been taken from it alive, but taken in a way almost more dreadful than murder. So our task changed at once from searching a room to hunting a moving and cunning enemy through London itself.

Part 19

The discovery under the floor was not yet finished with us. After my explanation about Marjorie's disguise, both men stood staring at me as if I had spoken some dreadful madness. Yet the facts were too ugly and too exact to be put aside. The hair, the hidden clothes, the ring in the passage, and the young man seen leaving the house all pointed in one direction.

Sydney was the first to speak, and as usual he spoke loudly. He cried out that Marjorie would never of her own will walk abroad in such foul clothes and that, if I said she had done so, I must also say that she had gone mad. I answered that madness was not needed. A trance, imposed by a stronger will, would explain the whole thing well enough.

Lessingham asked where the Arab could have hidden while Atherton and Holt were in the house. I told him that I could not yet say, but that I had no doubt at all that the creature had been there. It had first mastered Holt and sent him away, knowing Atherton would follow. Then, when the coast was clear, it had shown itself to Miss Lindon and bent her to its purpose.

Sydney cursed himself for leaving her, and Lessingham cursed the enemy who had used such a trick. I went on, because there was no help in rage by itself. I said that after cutting off Marjorie's hair and hiding her own clothes, the Arab had dressed her in old male garments already prepared for that very use. Sydney at once exclaimed that the clothes might very well have been Holt's, and the thought seemed likely enough.

We had then to ask ourselves what should be done next. In my judgment the first and plainest course was to go at once to the woman who lived opposite and had seen so much from her window. Her name, as Atherton had already told us, was Miss Coleman. If anyone in the neighbourhood could tell us what had happened after Marjorie entered the house, it was she.

So we crossed the road to Miss Coleman's dwelling, which was at least as singular as its owner. The house looked as if it had settled into old age while waiting for the neighbourhood to improve around it. There was about the place a stubborn air, as though it refused to move with the times because it despised them.

Miss Coleman herself proved worthy of her house. She was a very old woman, between seventy and eighty if a day, dry, sharp, and full of that fierce certainty which some elderly people acquire when they have long been obeyed by no one and contradicted by many. She received us with no sign of pleasure and made it plain at once that if we wanted information, we must take it in her fashion and not our own.

She would not be "madamed," she said, and she had no patience for lip service. Her name was Miss Louisa Coleman, though only her relatives called her Louisa. Since none of us had any wish to become relatives to her, we accepted the shorter form and listened as meekly as circumstances allowed.

She began, not with today's events, but with the property itself. The whole ground, she said, had been left to her by her late uncle, George Henry Jobson, who was buried in Hammersmith Cemetery nearby. She considered it one of the finest building sites near London, was certain that its value would greatly rise, and meant one day to cover it with high-class mansions and not with what she called shanties. Meanwhile, she lived there to keep an eye on things herself.

As for the house opposite, she had never meant to let it at all until about a month before, when she received the strangest request for a tenancy that I have heard of in my professional life. A rough and childish letter had come asking to rent the empty house and had enclosed fifty pounds in loose notes. The writer signed himself Mohamed el Kheir and gave an address at the post office in Sligo Street.

Since the house was hardly worth twenty pounds a year in its condition, the fifty was more than enough to tempt a practical landlady. Miss Coleman sent a receipt for a year and thought that would be the end of the matter. Yet the very next morning, before she had expected any answer, she found that the tenant was already in possession.

She went over meaning to see if anything was wanted, but the reception she received cured her of any neighbourly plans. The Arab, as she called him, came upon her with such a face, such a voice, and such violent words that she fled in terror. He shouted at her to go away, said that she had her fifty pounds and wanted nothing else, and warned her never to trouble him again.

After that she left him strictly alone. Still, from her own windows she watched the house almost constantly, by day and often by night as well. She had seen the tenant going in and out at all hours, always hurrying as if in fear, and she had seen many people come to the door, more women than men and even children, yet never once had she seen any caller admitted.

Stranger still were the sounds. At times, she said, the place might have been a house of the dead, so still was it. Then all at once there would come shrieks, screams, squawks, and cries through the night, noises so dreadful that she had more than once thought the devil himself must be in the front room.

She was particularly troubled by the cats. Before the Arab took the place, she had noticed hardly any in the neighbourhood. Since his arrival, there had been troops of them, gathering at night in numbers and making wild noises round the house. She had even seen them at the windows, upstairs and down, as if they belonged there.

All this she told at great length and in her own hard biting manner, while

Sydney fidgeted, Lessingham burned with impatience, and I tried not to rush her. At last, when she seemed to be nearing the present day, I asked as gently as I could whether she had observed what had occurred at the house that morning. She rebuked me at once for hurrying her, but the reproof itself showed that we were finally approaching the point we most needed to hear.

Part 20

Miss Coleman, once she was allowed to proceed in her own fashion, resumed the story of that morning with great sharpness and no little self-importance. She said that when the Arab came home, it was exactly seven o'clock. She knew the time because her own clock was half an hour fast, and when she went to take the milk, it was striking half-past seven. The milkman, seeing someone hurrying along the road, called out to her that her "friend" was coming, and at once she looked to see who it might be.

She said she saw him quite plainly in the morning light. He came flying down the road at a wonderful speed, opened the door of the house opposite, and let himself in as if he belonged there. From that instant, she declared, she kept the place under observation, determined that if he came out again, he should not do so before hearing what she chose to say to him.

Between seven and eight she herself went across and knocked. She hammered first at the front door, then at the back, and afterward at the front window also, crying out that she was Miss Louisa Coleman, the owner of the house, and that she had seen him go in. No notice at all was taken of her until, all at once, the blind flew up, the window was raised, and the most dreadful face she had ever seen thrust itself out almost into her own.

According to her, the thing was more like some hideous ape than a man. It screamed at her in broken English, telling her to go away, that she had had her fifty pounds and wanted nothing else, and that if she ever came again, she would be sorry. The fright of that encounter, she said, was so great that she fled at once and afterward had to drink four cups of tea before her nerves were steady again.

Since then she had watched the house more closely than ever. So when later in the day she saw three fresh arrivals, one young man, a second young man, and a young lady, she was ready to mark every movement they made. Sydney Atherton, of course, was one of the two men, and the other was Holt. The young lady was Marjorie.

At first, she said, they hammered at the front door in the usual way and got no answer. Then, instead of going off like ordinary callers, they went round to the back and somehow got in through the kitchen window, woman and all. Presently the blind in the front room was pulled down, and she saw Atherton standing there with it in his hand, which convinced her that the whole party had entered the house without permission and yet expected no resistance from within.

That, to her mind, proved that something quite beyond the common was taking place. Had the Arab been merely absent, the matter would have been simple enough. But she was certain he was inside, since she had seen him go in and had never seen him come out again. So she sat at her bedroom window, watching with all her might, expecting every moment to hear a fight, a cry, or some open disturbance.

Instead, after about five minutes, the front door opened and out came Holt. She described him as marching stiff and straight as a grenadier, with his shoulders back and his head high, moving fast and oddly, as if some wire inside him held him upright. At once Atherton came after him and stood at the gate staring, plainly puzzled by his behaviour, while Marjorie remained on the step looking after the same departing figure.

When Holt turned the corner and vanished, Atherton seemed to make up his mind and ran after him as hard as he could go. Marjorie was then left alone. Miss Coleman expected that he would soon return with the other man, and from Marjorie's lingering by the gate she judged that the young lady expected the same. Yet no one came back.

After a little while Marjorie re-entered the house, and Miss Coleman saw her pass the front room window. Then, after some minutes, she came out again to the gate and stood looking and looking down the road. Still there was no sign of either

man. So once more she returned into the house. This time, Miss Coleman said, she never saw her come out again.

When I put it to her that Miss Lindon must somehow have left the house without her noticing, she rejected the idea altogether. She had not left her chair. She had not taken her eyes from the place. There was, in her view, something queer about that house since the Arab had entered it, and if she had failed to see Marjorie come out, that failure must itself be part of the queerness.

Yet she had seen someone else. Some time after Marjorie's second return into the house, she saw a young man come out of the front door. She could not clearly describe the face because he wore a dirty cloth cap pulled down low, and he went by too quickly. But his clothing, she said, was such rubbish that no ragman would have thanked anyone for it, and the things hung on him like clothes put on a scarecrow.

More than that, his walk struck her strongly. He went along with the same odd stiffness Holt had shown, head up, shoulders back, body held so straight that, as she said, her kitchen poker would have looked crooked beside him. That was the figure which, in my judgment, had been Marjorie in male disguise, driven out under compulsion while her own clothes and hair were hidden under the floor.

When I asked if anything had occurred between Marjorie's disappearance from the front room and the exit of this second young man, Miss Coleman thought for a moment and then remembered one further circumstance. She said that while she sat watching, she saw at the front-room window what she first took to be an old gentleman down on his knees peering out from within. She had not the least notion what such a person could be doing there, and she had not seen him enter either.

Her description of him was curious. He seemed wrapped in some sort of cloak drawn close round him, and he moved away from the window in a furtive fashion as if he wished not to be observed. Lessingham, on hearing this, declared with great agitation that he believed every word to be true, for he thought he knew too well who that old gentleman must be.

We had scarcely digested this last part of the tale when there came a tapping at the window. Atherton stood outside, staring in with his usual impatient energy

and calling to us to come out at once because he had news. Miss Coleman was thrown into a flutter at the very idea of his entering her house and opened the front door only far enough to let Lessingham and me slip through, after which she shut it behind us with a bang that expressed her opinion of Sydney better than any speech could have done.

Outside the gate stood Atherton, and behind him stood a policeman whose face wore the half-amused expression of a man not at all sure that the gentleman addressing him is sane, but perfectly willing to hear more. Atherton told us that while we had been, as he put it, mewed up with the old cat, he had been busy. Then he made the constable tell what he had seen.

The officer knew the Arab at once and by reputation. He said that on his beat the man was well known as "the Arab," a queer fellow who flew about in all weathers and at all hours as if his life depended on speed. An hour or a little more before, while the constable was going on duty, he had seen a crowd before the District Railway Station, and in the middle of that crowd stood the Arab arguing with a cabman.

On the Arab's head was a huge bundle, five or six feet long, perhaps more. He wished to take this bundle inside the cab with him, and the cabman refused. The officer had not stayed to see the matter settled because he was due elsewhere. Yet he knew the cabman well enough to give us the man's name and address at once.

His name, he said, was Ellis, known among his fellows as Four-Wheel Ellis because he drove a four-wheeler. His stand was in Church Mews, St John's Road, Bradmore. I took down the details at once. Then, just as we were climbing back into our hansom, the constable recalled one final point, and this point was perhaps the most important of all.

He had heard the Arab repeating the destination again and again in his harsh foreign way. The words were "Waterloo Railway Station." Ellis had answered that he would drive him there readily enough, but that the bundle must go on the roof and not inside the cab. The Arab, however, kept insisting that he took the bundle with him to Waterloo, and there the pair had continued wrangling while the crowd laughed.

As we drove away, Lessingham again fell into the belief that Marjorie had been in the bundle, either dead or drugged and helpless. Atherton, though less hopeless in tone, agreed with him more than he agreed with me. I repeated that I doubted it. If the Arab had been so anxious about the bundle's contents, that did not of itself prove it contained Miss Lindon. It proved only that it held something he would not trust out of his own sight.

Neither man was satisfied by my answer, but neither could disprove it either. What mattered more than argument was that we now possessed the first solid outward clue since Marjorie's disappearance. We had a known cabman, a named destination, and a direction in which the chase must instantly move. So the business passed, in that moment, from guesswork in a little empty house to a pursuit through London.

Part 21

We drove first to Waterloo, because if the Arab had truly taken train for Southampton, the station itself was the one place where facts might still be had in place of guesses. At the booking office I stopped the chief platform inspector, George Bellingham, whom I knew a little, and asked him to help me question the proper clerk at once. Time, in such a matter, was worth more than courtesy.

The clerk who came was a young fellow named Stone, quick-eyed and obliging. I asked him if during the day he had issued any tickets to a person dressed as an Arab. He answered at once that he had, by the 7.25 train, and that the man had bought not one ticket but three single third-class tickets to Southampton.

That point was of the highest importance. If there were three tickets, then our quarry had not been travelling alone. I asked for a description, and Stone said that the man was very old, very ugly, and had the most extraordinary eyes he had ever seen. He added that the fellow carried a great bundle on his head, so large and awkward that it had annoyed all the other passengers trying to get at the window.

Bellingham then supplied more. The Arab, he said, had insisted on taking the

great bundle into the compartment with him instead of sending it to the van. Since he could not be reasoned with, and since the train was not unusually full, they had put him into an otherwise empty compartment and allowed the bundle to occupy the seat beside him.

At first Bellingham had thought him alone. But just before the train started, two Englishmen entered that same compartment. One, according to the barrier inspector, looked like a commonplace enough person. The other was dressed like a tramp in rags and tatters. That second Englishman, in our eyes, was plainly Marjorie in her dreadful disguise.

Since the train was due at Basingstoke a little after nine, I asked Bellingham to wire there at once and have the Arab and his companions detained until further orders. He agreed, on condition that I took the responsibility on myself, and I did so gladly. At the same time I sent as full a report as I could to Scotland Yard, so that official action might follow as quickly as the machinery of London allows.

While we waited for an answer, I urged the other two to eat something. Lessingham wanted nothing, and Sydney wanted less than nothing. But I knew very well that a starving man is no better in a crisis than a drunk one. So I dragged them into the refreshment room by force of argument and almost by force of hand.

I myself ate after a fashion. Lessingham managed only a little soup, swallowing each spoonful as if it hurt him. Sydney picked at some miserable chicken and ham, clearly more occupied with inward agitation than with the plate before him. Yet even that poor food was better than none, and I count the stopping wise.

Before we had done, Bellingham hurried in with a telegram in his hand and cried that the birds had flown. According to the message from Basingstoke, our Arab and his companions were not in the train at all. The guard believed they had left it at Vauxhall, and the station there had been warned to advise us further.

A second communication followed almost at once, this one fuller and stranger. Complaints had been made on the journey of shrieks and yells from the compartment occupied by the Arab and the two Englishmen, as if someone inside were being murdered. Yet when the train reached Vauxhall and questions were put,

all three travellers insisted that nothing was wrong and that they had only been shouting for fun.

Since there were no signs of clear violence, they were allowed to pass. They left the station in a four-wheeler, the Arab and one Englishman inside and the other Englishman on the box. They took with them that same enormous bundle, which the Arab still refused to let out of his sight. The driver afterward reported that all the way one of the Englishmen inside, the ragged one, kept up a sort of wailing which so disturbed him that twice he climbed down to see what the matter was.

They had ordered the cab to Commercial Road, Limehouse, and had got out at the corner of Sutcliffe Street near the East India Docks. Then they had walked away, the two Englishmen in front and the Arab behind, before vanishing from the driver's sight. To the railway men and the cabman alike, both Englishmen had seemed weak-minded or touched in the head. To us, the horror beneath such simple language was only too easy to imagine.

Lessingham, on hearing of the shrieks from the train and the wailing in the cab, was almost overcome. His mind flew at once to all the suffering Marjorie might have undergone shut up in that railway compartment and then in that jolting cab with the monster who held her. He asked me, in a broken voice, what must have been done to her. I did not answer plainly, because in truth the possible answers were too dreadful to speak aloud.

He became so shaken that I tried once more to persuade him to turn back and attend to his public duties, or at least to save himself from complete collapse. But he turned on me bitterly and said that if he stood up in the House in such a state, the world would laugh and he would be ruined. Then he confessed that he stood on the very edge of madness, living not in one world but in two, with London round him and old Egyptian horrors rising alive before his eyes.

There was no help in pressing him further. So we drove on to Limehouse Police Station, where I showed the Vauxhall report to the inspector on duty and asked whether any of the local men had seen our Arab. While he went inside to inquire, an idle-looking boy on a bench beside a constable spoke up and said that he

himself had seen a Harab with a bloomin' great bundle on his head little more than an hour before.

He was not, perhaps, the most trustworthy witness in London, and the constable was ready enough to tell me so. Yet the boy's tale had marks of truth about it. He said he had run into the man by accident, had been knocked flat into the road by the force of the collision, and had noticed besides that another fellow was keeping close at the Arab's heels.

The inspector returned and said that none of his own men had yet seen the person in question, though he would place an officer at my disposal if I wished to make inquiries. He had hardly spoken before the street door burst open and another young ragamuffin rushed in without a cap, panting, wild-eyed, and half choked by speed.

He cried out that murder had been done, that a Harab had killed a bloke. The inspector and the constable both seized on him at once and demanded where. The boy, frightened but eager, gasped that it had happened up at Mrs Enderson's in Paradise Place and that the Arab was the murderer. At that moment our pursuit doubled indeed, for now we were no longer chasing only a captor and a stolen girl. We were racing toward a fresh death.

Part 22

We drove straight to Mrs Enderson's house in Paradise Place, and there at once saw that the report of murder was no foolish street alarm. The place was in uproar. Neighbours were at the doors, a police inspector was already inside, and everyone wore that eager frightened look which comes when death has entered an ordinary house and turned it into a public show.

We were taken upstairs to a poor little room. There, hidden partly behind the bed, lay the murdered man. The sight of him struck us all, but it struck us in different ways. To me he was a pitiful end to a pitiful story. To Sydney and Lessingham he was something more, because they knew the face at once.

It was Robert Holt. He lay twisted and broken as if life had been not merely

taken from him but used up. The doctor who was there declared that the case was not simple. Violence had been done, yes, but the body also showed such extreme weakness and wasting that death seemed to have met murder half way. In plain words, Holt had been so worn down by suffering that little more was needed to finish him.

The room itself told an ugly tale. There were signs of struggle, yet not enough to make the whole matter plain. The bed had been disturbed, things were out of place, and the air held the same foul heavy smell which we had already learned to connect with the Arab. It was enough to make any man present feel that though Holt was dead, the true enemy was still moving and still close ahead of us.

Then Mrs Enderson gave her evidence. She was a lodging-house keeper of the common sort, full of self-importance and fear in equal measure, and much offended by the whole business as if murder had been committed less against a man than against her property. Yet for all her complaints, what she said was of real use.

According to her, the Arab had taken rooms there and had returned with company. She had heard noises from above which at first she tried to ignore. Then had come sounds so dreadful that even she, used no doubt to many rough voices in her line of life, had grown frightened. She spoke of shrieks and sobbing and a noise like someone fighting for breath.

When she was asked who had cried out so terribly, she answered in a way that struck us all. If anyone had put the question to her before she knew of the murder, she said she would have sworn that the voice was a woman's. Only a woman, and a woman gone mad with fear, could have made such sounds. Yet so far as she had seen, there had been no woman there at all.

Later, a neighbour told her that the Arab had gone out carrying an enormous bundle on his head. Mrs Enderson herself had not seen him leave. But when she went upstairs after that, she found the room empty of everyone except poor Holt, lying dead behind the bed. That was all she knew, and it was enough to blacken the whole affair still more.

While we were still in the house, a message came from the local police. An

Arab with a great bundle had been seen near St Pancras Station, with a young man in tramp's clothes beside him. The young man appeared ill. They seemed to be waiting for a train north. I wrote at once that they should be stopped if possible, and if they had already gone, a special train should be made ready.

We drove without delay to St Pancras. The place was dark and almost empty, and for a moment I feared we had arrived too late even for information. But station officials soon appeared, and from them we learned enough to show that the chase was not yet hopeless. The Arab had indeed been there.

He had taken tickets on the midnight train and had travelled with that same great bundle. There had also been with him a young man dressed like a tramp. As on the earlier journey, odd cries and disturbances had been heard from the compartment. Yet when railway men interfered, everything had looked just orderly enough to let them pass on.

The northbound train had left, and there was no time to lose. So we took the special and went after it through the dark. Lessingham was in a dreadful state, and more than once I wished he had let me go alone. But grief and fear had joined in him so completely that there was no moving him from his purpose.

Then came the sudden stopping. We were running through the night when a red light appeared ahead, waving wildly. Our engine checked in time, and we climbed down to learn the cause. Another train, the very train we followed, had been wrecked not many minutes before.

Heavy trucks had broken loose and run down upon it. The shock had smashed the front part of the train into ruin. Even in darkness we could see twisted wood, broken iron, smoke, steam, and confusion. The engine had turned over, and the first coaches behind it were crushed into one another so completely that for a while no one could get at what remained inside.

We had to wait for daylight before the wreck could be searched properly. When at last the first third-class compartment was opened, what we found there was stranger than anything yet. Pieces of burnt or half-burnt rags lay scattered everywhere. Fragments of cloth were found too, though later experts could not agree what kind of material it really was.

There were also great stains on the wood and cushions, wet at first and giving off an evil smell. Learned men afterward argued over them and could not come to any one conclusion. Some said the marks were made by blood. Others said they were from some wild animal. Others again said they were not blood at all, but some thick and hateful matter unknown to them.

In a corner of that ruined compartment lay the body of what looked like a tramp. It was Marjorie Lindon. She still lived, though life in her seemed no stronger than a small flame in a storm. No sign at all was found of the Arab. No sign of the bundle was found either. It was as if, at the very edge of destruction, the thing we hunted had slipped out of the hands of men and back into its own darkness.

Years have passed since those events. Marjorie did not die. It took a very long time to bring her fully back, not only in body but in mind, and for years she remained under the care of doctors. Yet in the end she recovered, and recovered well.

Her father died, and she came into the family estate. She afterward married Paul Lessingham. Sydney Atherton also married, and the wife he took was Dora Grayling, who had loved him long before he understood his own heart. Percy Woodville became an earl and married one of Dora's bridesmaids not long after.

Robert Holt's end was never fully explained in any exact and simple way. At the inquest the verdict was that he died of exhaustion. He was buried in Kensal Green under a fine stone, which was a better thing than he had known in life, though it came too late to warm or feed him. For my own part, I have never forgotten that among all the people in this dark affair, he was perhaps the least guilty and the most used.

As for the mystery itself, I do not pretend to solve it. Atherton and I have spoken of it many times, and we have never got much farther than we stood on that first day. Others saw the Beetle more clearly than I did. Yet from all I heard, and from all that followed, I am ready to believe that the thing we called the Beetle was no ordinary man or woman, and perhaps not wholly human at all.

Whether it died in that wreck, or escaped from it, I do not know. No one knows.

That is the worst truth of all. A mystery is bad enough when it ends in darkness, but worse when the darkness may still be alive.