

The Night of Creation

By J. D. Beresford

PART I THE DISCUSSION

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The discussion had threatened while they were still at dinner. Leslie Vernon had begun it: and there had been a hardness and a determination in his expression that had sharpened the suggestion of fanaticism in his clever face. Little Harrison, already looking a trifle flushed and dishevelled, had only managed to avoid the direct issue by talking rapidly, and with something more than his usual brilliance, about the true inwardness of the Russian Revolution; a subject upon which he had recently acquired some very special information. Even Lady Ulrica More, who was manifestly prepared to encourage Vernon, had been borne down and fairly talked into silence.

The other guests of the week-end party, although they had shown no signs of disapproving Vernon's choice of topic when he had irrelevantly introduced it, had accepted their cue with a tactful readiness. Little Harrison was their host, and if he wished, as he obviously did, to avoid this topic of Psychical Research, it was their duty to support him. Moreover, Mrs. Harrison had cut in almost at once, with that bird-like flustered air of hers, to the effect that spiritualism was almost "worse than religion with some people" and never led to anything but recriminations. Vernon had smiled with a fine effect of self-control when she had said that, but before he could defend himself, Harrison at the other end of the table had got under way with an anecdote of Lenin's pre-revolution career in Switzerland.

And directly dinner was finished, he had suggested that they should take their coffee and liqueurs on the lawn under the cedar. There was excuse enough—it was a wonderful night—but Greatorex, the leader-writer, who had acquired a habit of always boking for secret motives, was probably right in calling the move to the garden "a clever dodge."

"Dodge?" enquired young Fell listlessly. He had sat through dinner with a melancholy air of wondering how people could be interested in spirits whether of the dead or of the Russians; but Greatorex had been too much engrossed in drawing his own inferences to take any notice of Fell's distraction.

"Rather," he said, taking Fell's arm. "Gives Harrison the chance of shipping off when he can't stand it any longer. In a room, it's a bit pointed to get up and go away, but out here Vernon'll probably find himself addressing Harrison's empty chair."

Fell sighed. "What's he want—Vernon, I mean?" he asked indifferently.

Greatorex was willing enough to explain. "He wants to bring Harrison to book," he said, leading his companion down towards the sunk fence out of earshot of the rest of the party. "You see, Vernon has been tremendously interested in that book of Schrenck-Notsing's. You've seen it, I expect? It's all about materialisations. Extraordinary stuff. They did get amazing results. The book's full of photographs of the materialisations. Licked Crookes's *Katie King* into a cocked hat. Well, Vernon's been writing about it all over the place. Says it proves that there is a form of matter unknown to science, and that until the sceptics have disproved that, they had better shut up about the problem of immortality and so on. And then Harrison came out with a leader in the

Supplement, pooh-poohing the whole affair. Clever stuff, of course, but not very sound on the logical side."

"And Vernon wants to pin him down, I suppose?" Fell commented tepidly.

He wants to have a straight argument," Greatorex said and then sinking his voice to a confidential note, he continued, "And if you ask me, Fell, Harrison's afraid of spiritualism. I've seen him tackled before, and he loses his temper. He doesn't *want* to listen! You know the look that comes into a fellow's face when he's shutting his mind against you—a sort of resolution and concentration as if he'd got his eye on his own ideal somewhere in the middle distance, and did not mean to look away from it. . . ." He paused in the very heart of his account of Harrison's perversity, suddenly struck by the application of his description to the present expression on Fell's face. "Pretty much the look you're wearing now, in fact," he concluded drily. "Sorry if I've been boring you."

Fell came back to a realisation of his lapse with a slight start. "No, no, rather not, Greatorex," he said. "I mean it wasn't that; the truth is I'm rather worried. I was thinking. . ." he waved his hand vaguely in the direction of the sunset, and added, "That, somehow, made me feel as if. . ."

Greatorex thrust his hands into the pockets of his dinner-jacket and turned round to observe the phenomenon that had distracted Fell's attention. For a moment his prominent nose and rather small head came out as an emphatic silhouette against the afterglow in the North-West; and to Fell, already deep in the languors of sentiment, presented an air of picturesque romance.

Since Fell had come out from the high-lights and conventional influences of the house, his determination had begun to give way. In the atmosphere of the dining-room, he had felt certain that he would be right in doing what he had come down here expressly to do. Phyllis was no wife for a Civil Servant in his position. He had seen the consequences of such marriages in the Service. They kept a man back. If he married her, he would lose just that extra fillip of influence which would make the difference between special appointments and the common routine of promotion that would leave him no better prospect than an ultimate income of at best ten or twelve hundred pounds a year. One could not expect Lady Ulrica, for example, to continue the patronage she seemed, at present, so willing to lend him, if he made a marriage of that kind. He had seen it all so clearly while they were at dinner, and although his heart had failed him at the thought of his coming interview with Phyllis—she was so sweet and so gentle and she loved him with such an amazing singleness and rapture—he had been sure that he must give her up before his honour was entangled.

But now all the prestige of social success, everything that was represented by the fashion he had just left, was dwindling and fading; the effect of it falling away so that it seemed to him garish and unreal—as the lights and distractions of the town may seem to a man who sets his face eagerly towards the joy of his quiet home. The rest and immensity of nature was an enduring reality with which his love was in perfect accord. He and Phyllis had their place in it. If he could step down, now, to the sombre yews at the lake's edge and take her in his arms, as he had done a month ago, his last doubts would vanish on the instant. They would be one with the greatness of earth, and able to look down with contempt from their perfect enthronement, at the frivolous and ephemeral superficiality of conventional life. . .

The sound of Greatorex's voice seemed to take up the thread of his dreams.

"Course, you're a poet, Fell," Greatorex said. "You feel an evening like this, I suppose? Means something quite tremendous to you?"

"You see," Fell began, trembling on the verge of confession; "there is a reason why, more particularly, to-night. . ."

Greatorex turned round and looked at him. "I shouldn't," he said. "You'll be sorry afterwards. Better not tell me. I know I look romantic, but I'm not. Harrison says I ought to have been a pirate. He's wrong, I ought to have been a barrister. I'll tell you, now, just what I've been thinking while I've been hooking at all this view that makes you feel so sentimental. I've been thinking that I wouldn't like to have a lake so near the house—unhealthy. And I don't care for all those black yews, either. Melancholy, mournful, things."

Fell shuddered. "They *are* mournful," he agreed, "but they're in keeping."

"Too much," Greatorex said. "I don't know whether it's your sentimental influence or not, Fell; but, damn it, this place makes me feel superstitious, to-night. It's so infernally quiet and brooding, as if it were hatching some hasty mischief."

"Or some wonderful miracle?" Fell suggested.

"We probably mean the same thing," Greatorex said. "I've got a trick of using prose words to get attention. "Wonderful miracle," you know, would be either a cliché or bombast in a leader."

Fell did not appear to hear this explanation. He was looking out over the swell of Orton Park that was separated from Harrison's garden by the width of the lake. The afterglow was slowly dying and the greens of turf and wood were deepening and hardening into dark masses little softer than the funereal shadows of the clustered yews. The detail that had recently started into almost excessive prominence under the level light of the setting sun, was taking refuge in the temporary darkness before it emerged again altered in shape and colour to greet the mysteries of the moon. Only the lake still shone faintly, reflecting a last glimmer of brightness in the Northern sky. Near the island, a streamer of indigo ripples splayed out to mark the course of some belated water-bird, hurrying back to the cover of the reeds; and in the hush of the coming night Fell could almost believe that he heard the delicate clash and whisper of infinitely tiny waves breaking in hasty processional upon the sandy foreshore.

"Straordinarily peaceful," murmured Greatorex. "Suppose we ought to be joining the others?"

"Yes, I suppose we ought," Fell agreed tamely. What else was there to do? He could not go down to the village of Long Orton now, and beseech Phyllis to come out and walk with him by the lake. And without her, all the glory of this amazing night was wasted.

Nor was the full promise of the night yet revealed to him; for it was not until with a reluctant sigh he had turned to follow Greatorex back to the nearly invisible group under the cedar, that he saw the Hunter's moon, a great disc of ruddy copper, resting as it seemed on the very edge of the eastern horizon.

He lingered, gazing, for a few seconds, half resolved even now to escape the banalities of polite conversation on the lawn and go up to the village. This was such a rare night for the silences of love; serene, brooding and mystical. Yet the automaton in him, the formalised, cultured habit of the Civil Servant, moved him relentlessly back towards the time decencies of polite society and the patronage of Lady Ulrica More.

As he silently approached the group on the lawn he heard the clear, musical voice of Leslie Vernon.

"At least you might let one state a case, Harrison," he was saying.

They had already passed the stage of skirmishing for position, when Greatorex rejoined them. Something had apparently happened to Harrison since he came out into the garden. He had lost

that effect of impatience which had underlain all his talk of Russia, when, as though afraid of silence, he had been talking, a trifle desperately, against some latent opposition.

Now, comfortably relaxed in the depth of a well-designed basket chair, and little more of him visible than the gleam of his shirt front, the pale blur of his face and the occasional glow of his cigarette end, he had an air of being tolerantly complacent. It seemed that he was willing to listen, however condescendingly, to Vernon's attack.

"Look here, Harrison," Vernon had begun. "Why won't you talk this out?"

"Nothing fresh to say," Harrison had replied.

"But I have," Vernon continued; and then Lady Ulrica definitely put her weight into the scale by saying, "How fascinating! Something really new in the way of evidence?"

"Or only a *rechauffée*?" Harrison interpolated.

"At least you might let one state a case, Vernon said as Greatorex joined time other four and sat down with a grunt beside his wife.

"We saw you gesticulating picturesquely against the sunset, G.," Harrison remarked, as though he would even now create a diversion and defer the discussion indefinitely.

Greatorex snorted; quite conscious of the fact that in Harrison's presence he always played up in manner to that part of the buccaneer which had been thrust upon him, although he disclaimed it in speech.

"Been discussing the effects of sunset on temperament," he said.

"But did you see the *Moon*?" asked Mrs. Harrison, rather in the tone of one who introduces a delightful piece of scandal.

"Afraid I missed that," Greatorex said. "But I expect Fell has found it. He's probably worshipping now."

"Oh! but you ought," Mrs. Harrison asserted, still intent no doubt, on keeping away from the subject of spiritualism, for her husband's sake. "It was like a rather badly done stage moon balanced on the scenery. Shan't we all go and worship with Mr. Fell?"

No one moved, however; and time excuse of joining Fell was spoilt by his arrival at the cedar.

"Do help yourself to coffee and anything you want, Mr. Fell," Mrs. Harrison said. "If you can see, that is." She was certainly doing her best to keep time conversation at the right after-dinner level. She was so far successful that for a minute or two little spurts of irrelevant talk continued to start up and die away again, like the uncertain catpaws of wind before a flat calm.

It was Harrison himself who at last anticipated the inevitable. He must have felt, as everyone had—including his plucky but finally despairing wife—that it was inevitable. There was something that urged them, something more than that quiet determination of Vernon's, although his very silence conveyed a perpetual sense of remonstrance. But this other, greater influence was with them as an almost palpable presence. It was like a force exhausting them and drawing them into a common focus.

None of them was more keenly aware of it than Fell, though he attributed the weakness that was overcoming him to a particular source. For here, with the arm of his chair almost touching that of Lady Ulrica's, he was planning an interview with Phyllis that held no least hint of the renunciation of love. He was giving way freely and without reserve to his dream. Moreover, he had a curious sense of instant accomplishment, as if at that very moment his spirit and the spirit of Phyllis had touched and coalesced. He was drifting into far heights of remote and supernal ecstasy, when the thin, high voice of Harrison recalled him to earth; and he started as though, on the verge of sleep, he had been brutally jarred and awakened by the violent slamming of a door.

"Hm! hm! Well, Vernon," Harrison said. "We're all waiting for that statement of your case."

Vernon's chair creaked slightly as if he had suddenly leaned forward.

This moment of their beginning, when by some undividable act of common consent all oppositions had been temporarily relinquished and they were agreed at least to listen, was, also, the moment of greatest darkness. Presently the moon transmuted from copper to brass would rise above the house and give validity and form to all that was now being created in the profundity of the night. But when Vernon began to speak, he was hidden from them; they realised him only as a voice, that issued with a steady and increasing definition out of the silence and the shadows.

He talked well, pleading without passion for an unprejudiced examination of all the new 'facts' in psychical research. He had a scholarly knowledge of his subject and gave his instances and authorities, building up as it seemed to Lady Ulrica, to Fell, and even to Greatorex, a case that it would be very hard to knock down.

Not once did Harrison interrupt him, and during Vernon's occasional pauses the immense stillness of the night seemed to close in upon the little group under the cedar with a sudden intensity. The slender stream of his steady speech was like a little candle, burning delicately in the darkness, and when it was extinguished, his listeners were freshly aware of themselves and their surroundings. In those moments of almost painful silence, they sought to recover their consciousness of the familiar world by restless movements and faint articulations. Chairs creaked, someone sighed, and once Greatorex rather brutally coughed.

Nearly at the end of his long speech, however, Vernon's tone became more emotional. He was talking, then, of materialisations and of time strange and as yet unrecognised form of matter—provisionally known as the ectoplasm or teleplasm—that issues from the body of the medium, is manifested in visible forms that can be successfully photographed, and can handle material objects.

"I claim that the existence of this matter is proved," Vernon concluded. "Given favourable conditions, the medium can build up a form, visible, tangible, ponderable and capable of simulating every appearance of material reality. I don't say that this amazing phenomenon proves the immortality of the soul, but I do say that until you produce another hypothesis to cover the immense accumulation of tested facts, you have no right to pronounce any opinion in psychical research."

By this time the moon, now pale as scoured brass, had topped the trees behind the house, and was sending out pale and slender shafts of light to pierce here and there the overshadowing gloom of the wide cedar: one shaft had dappled the statuesque bare shoulder of Lady Ulrica, and another had slanted down upon the smooth fair hair of Leslie Vernon. And by such reflections and by other sources of faint diffusion, the heavy brooding darkness that had so far enveloped the group on the lawn, had been definitely lifted. Dimly they could see each other, either as shadows against the increasing brightness beyond, or as weakly illuminated figures picked out, maybe, by a brilliant little spark of moonshine that had pierced its way through some common opening in the many-storied foliage above.

And although there had come no least stir of wind to break the intense calm, the releasing effect of the light was manifest upon the spirits of the party. As Vernon ceased speaking everyone suddenly wanted to talk. A little fusillade of chatter broke out which only gave way when Greatorex was heard saying: "If he believe not Stainton Moses and the Lodges, neither will he believe though one rose from the dead."

Mrs. Harrison laughed brightly. "We must remember that," she said.

"But it's not a question of rising from the dead at all, Mr. Greatorex," Lady Ulrica put in. She had no sense of humour. Vernon apparently felt that all the effect of his long argument was being

foolishly dissipated by this absurd interruption. "Well, Harrison, what's your answer to my case?" he asked in a slightly raised voice.

Harrison began to stammer, a sure sign that his temper was at last beginning to conquer him. "I—I can't see, even if we submit the validity of these matremahisations," he said, "that you—you are any nearer to proving your general case, Vernon. I've been into the whole question very thoroughly and—and impartially, and I can only say that I see no reason whatever to assume that we have ever received any communication from spirits of the dead. I think that that is the real point under discussion, and I can't see that you've done much to support your contention. What d'you say, G.?"

Greatorax grunted. A beam of moonlight had just caught the most salient of his features, and at the moment his face appeared to be all nose.

"You won't accept my explanation of the facts, Harrison?" Vernon persisted.

"I—I don't see why I should," Harrison replied. "I don't see the necessity for it. I—I'm not convinced, by any means, of the validity of your examples. At present, I am content to go on with the enquiry without formulating any theory. I contend that the evidence up to the present time is insufficient to theorise upon."

"Ah! well, there's a lot more coming," Vernon replied, and for the first time a real note of passion crept into his voice. "Don't you realise that all these developments taken together are just the first stages of the knowledge that is coming to us? They are symptoms, that's all, of the new trend in the evolution of mankind; of the coming of the new age—the age of the Spirit. The days of materialism are nearly spent, and the next generation will smile at our feeble tentatives."

"Do you ask me how I know? Well, I can't tell you in terms that you can understand. The best part of my knowledge is intuitional, but intuition, even mysticism, must no longer be divorced from science and intellect. That, I feel, is the essential synthesis of the new doctrine. We are going to produce our material proofs; in the future religion and science will become one."

But own opinion, precisely," said Lady Ulrica.

Vernon's homily had proved a little too much for Harrison. He tried to speak and could not control the pitch of his voice, which soared ineffectively to a falsetto squeak.

"Er—er—I—I. . ." he began, and had to get to his feet before he could attain coherence. Then he started again with "No, no! It's incredible nonsense that—the kind of religion foreshadowed by spiritualism—could ever appeal to sensible men and women. Are we to be expected to listen to the drivelling platitudes of some supposed spirit communicating through an illiterate old woman with the further interposition of a "control," speaking pigeon English and imitating the worst sophistications of a spoilt child? No, no, positively I can't take that kind of nonsense seriously. I—I have no sort of desire to imitate the credulity of Lodge, Barrett and Crookes—no sort of desire. I—I—it's absurd. I've no patience even to talk about it. Who is coming to look at the moon?" And without waiting to receive any response to his invitation, he turned his back on the cedar and strode out, a perturbed and impatient little figure into the light of the open garden.

The other six followed him in a straggling procession.

Emma Harrison was obviously relieved that the discussion was at an end. "I said it would only end in recriminations," she explained to Greatorax, who looked about seven feet high in contrast with her diminutive slenderness. "Charles never can keep his temper about that subject. And I did think it was very splendid of him to keep it as long as he did. We can't do with all that nonsense. Can you, Mr. Greatorax?"

Mrs. Harrison dropped her voice to an indiscreet confidence. "I always think that our poor dear Lady Ulrica," she whispered, "is so very much the type from which mediums are made. You know, stout, placid, and not too clever."

"Queer thing why mediums should generally be so stupid," commented Greatorex, tactfully avoiding any overt agreement with his hostess's description of Lady Ulrica.

For a few minutes the party drifted about the lawn in couples, with the exception of Harrison, who maintaining a little distance from the others was pacing restlessly up and down, either working off his spleen or thinking out some really telling retort that should settle Vernon's business once and for all.

The moon was now high in the heavens, but it had suffered another transmutation. A faint screen of misty cirrus had crept over the sky, and the brass was toned down almost to the whiteness of silver. And with this change, the light in the garden had become more diffused. The shadows had lost their hardness the high-lights their accentuation.

And by degrees, some sense of a peculiar quality in the night began to affect every member of the little party on the lawn. They began by almost imperceptible changes in their movements to drift together into a little knot, like the swimming bubbles in a cup. The area of their promenade diminished until even Harrison himself had come into the focus; and yet when they had again drawn into a group they had nothing to say to one another. It is true that they were still conscious of a slight social constraint, due to what had amounted to a quarrel between the host and one of his guests. But there was something in their attitude and their common movement towards each other that suggested some deeper cause for their momentary awkwardness. It was as if each of them was aware of some sudden fear, and hesitated to speak lest the shameful fact should be revealed.

It was Mrs. Harrison who first broke a silence that was becoming altogether too insistent—even the soft hush of their feet upon the grass had ceased. She laughed artificially, with a touch as it seemed of bravado, a laugh that might have disguised a shudder.

"I don't know how it seems to you," she said in a high strained voice, "but it strikes me that it's actually getting a little chilly."

"Yes, yes. It is, Emma," her husband replied with an effect of relief. "I—I think we'd better go in. We get a cold air off the lake, now and again," he explained to the company at large.

"Precious little air, Harrison," muttered Greatorex. "I've never known a stiller night."

"Haze come over the moon," commented Fell, staring up into the sky.

"It has certainly turned colder," remarked Lady Ulrica with a shiver; "much colder."

Harrison cleared his throat and made his usual effort to get his pitch. "Hm! Hm! Perhaps we're going to get some phenomena," he said with a slightly cracked laugh. "Always the first warning, isn't it, Vernon, a draught of cold air?"

"Always," Lady Ulrica said solemnly, before Vernon could reply.

Harrison was about to speak again when Greatorex cut in. "I say," he said, in a voice that held a just perceptible note of excitement, "is that one of your maids down there by the lake? Girl in white; moving about by the yews?"

"What *do* you mean?" Mrs. Harrison replied, speaking with a little flurry of haste. "It must be after eleven, and the maids are in bed long ago, I hope."

"Someone down there, anyway," Greatorex asserted.

"Hm, hm! G.'s quite right, my dear," Harrison said. "I—I think we ought to investigate this in the cause of common morality."

"Charles? It may be one of the village girls," his wife suggested.

"In which case she has no business in our paddock at midnight," Harrison replied, and as he spoke he began to walk with an air of mechanical determination towards the steps in the sunk fence that led to the meadow.

"Shall we all go?" Greatorrex asked, but Mrs. Harrison manifestly hesitated.

"I don't know. Do you think, perhaps. . . ." she began.

Greatorrex, however, had not waited for her permission, in half a dozen strides he too had reached the meadow. Vernon, Lady Ulrica and Mrs. Greatorrex followed him with effect of yielding to a sudden impulse, and Emma found herself alone on the lawn with Robert Fell.

"Well, if they're all going," she said with a little hysterical laugh, "I suppose we may as well go, too."

"I don't know. Yes. Do you think we ought?" Fell replied in a strangely agitated voice.

Mrs. Harrison turned to look at him with a little start of surprise. "Surely you're not afraid?" she asked, unconsciously revealing the cause of her own reluctance.

"Afraid?" he echoed, entirely misunderstanding her true intention. "Afraid of what?"

"Well—ghosts!" she said.

"But you don't really imagine, Mrs. Harrison. . . ." Fell began.

"Not for one moment," she said with determination. She was disturbed and a trifle shocked by the marks of his agitation, which had nevertheless stiffened her own courage. She was prepared now to demonstrate how little she cared for an unexpected coldness in the air, or for white figures moving about at the most unlikely hours on the borders of the lake.

Already the shadows of the other five were stringing out across the meadow, all of them clearly visible in the milky light of the thinly veiled moon. They were moving very deliberately; but a certain deliberation of approach was only decent if they expected to disturb a tryst.

"Well, aren't you coming, Mr. Fell?" Emma asked sharply.

He sighed and then, "Yes, I'll come," he said, in the tone of one who finally commits himself.

PART 2 THE APPEARANCE

I

Harrison and Fell were within a few yards of the plantation, when the vague pillar of illusive whiteness that flitted in the shadow of the trees moved towards them, and, after the slight hesitation of one who dreads to plunge, stepped into the moonlight. But having thus dared the shock of immersion, it seemed that for the moment her strength could carry her no further. She stood motionless and within an effect of strained effort, on the shadow, her eyes downcast and her crossed hands grasping the ends of the tulle scarf that draped her head and shoulders.

In that stiff pose, with the rigid hues of her figure delivered milk-white against the sullen background of the yews, she looked less like a human being than the rather conventional image of some idealised virgin, the expression of a dream, modelled none too definitely in wax by an artist whose recollection of his vision was already fading.

Harrison stopped short and laid his hand on Fell's arm. "Who is it?" he asked him. It was manifestly an absurd question to put to his companion, a stranger in Long Orton; but in the first agitation of the discovery Harrison clutched at the nearest support.

"No idea!" Fell replied. He was suddenly disappointed and downcast. This girl, whoever she might be, was certainly not Phyllis, and all the furious expectations and fine resolves that had wonderfully lighted him had been quenched with an abruptness that left him listless and momentarily devoid of curiosity.

"Who is it?" repeated Greator, who had been only a pace or two behind them. He spoke in the tone a man might use while surreptitiously addressing his neighbour during a church-service. This echo of his own question seemed to annoy Harrison. He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and turning round addressed his wife in a voice that was unnecessarily strident.

"Here's a mysterious lady come to call upon us, Emma," he said.

And then Mrs. Harrison, giggling nervously, put the essential but manifestly hopeless question for the third time.

"Who is she?" she asked, in an undertone.

Harrison may have hoped that the shock of his voice, and, perhaps, of his determinedly sceptical attitude, would have exorcised the phantom that was assuredly, so he had already decided, the creation of a moment's excited imagination. But when he turned back to face the plantation, the pale figure still stood in the same attitude, and seemed now, moreover, to have attained a sharper definition of outline; to be altogether more human and solid.

"By Jove, you know, it *is* someone, after all," Harrison murmured.

"Oh! It *is* someone, right enough," Fell said, at present concerned only with the fact that it was not the right someone.

"Oh! Well!" Harrison softly ejaculated, as one who braces himself to an encounter.

He stepped forward a couple of paces with a slightly grotesque air of greeting. "Hm! hm! I don't quite know. . . ." he said; "that is, might I ask whom we have the pleasure of— of meeting so unexpectedly?"

The frozen intensity of the silence that appeared to follow his question may have been due to the fact that each member of the party was holding his or her breath in the expectation of the moment.

The figure moved. Slowly and with an almost painful deliberation she released the ends of the tulle scarf that was about her head and shoulders, and let her hands fall to her sides. Her mouth opened, but she did not speak; and after what might have been another effort to reply—a just perceptible movement of the head—she took a careful step backward, entering again the shadow of the yews.

"But, I say, you know. . . ." Harrison began.

She interrupted him with a gesture, raising her hand and pointing with an unmistakeable certainty at Lady Ulrica. And the hand and forearm that by this gesture she once more plunged into the moonlight had something the appearance of opalescent glass.

Harrison, standing with his back to the house-party, did not understand this indication and turned his head to see who or what had been selected for peculiar notice; but Lady Ulrica responded with a fine dignity. She came forward past Harrison right up to the edge of the yews, and said in a voice that did credit to her breeding:

"My dear, what is it? Can I help you in any way?"

And then, no doubt to the infinite relief of the Harrisons, the unknown replied. She had a little husky voice when she first spoke, a voice that suggested the last sleepy clutter of roosting birds; and her speech came with an appearance of effort.

"Presently," she said rather indistinctly and added something that sounded like "more strength."

Lady Ulrica was painfully short-sighted. She had those large, protuberant brown eyes, almost devoid of expression, that are sometimes indicative of heart trouble. And as she answered, she was fumbling at her breast for the impressive, handled lorgnette that was discovered later on the coffee table under the cedar.

"We weren't quite sure, you know," she said in her authoritative contralto; "whether you were an apparition or not, and so we came to see. But, of course, now we have seen you and heard you speak, we shall be delighted to help you if you want help, or—if you'd prefer it—to go away."

"Stay near me," the stranger said in a clearer voice, and striking a lower pitch than when she had spoken first. "Till I get more strength."

The rest of the party had paused in a little knot, some six or seven feet away, while this brief conversation had gone forward, listening staring with an absorption that in other circumstances might have been judged as slightly lacking in good taste. But now, some kind of realisation of their attitude seemed to come to them, and they diverted their attention by a manifest effort from the two people on the edge of the plantation and began to talk in low voices among themselves.

Mrs. Harrison, moving across to her husband, looked at him within raised eyebrows, silently asking the obvious question.

"Fraud," lie said in a careful undertone, and added rather more viciously, "Hoax of some kind."

Mrs. Harrison, however, was not to be rebuffed so easily. "But, Charles," she said with a slight urgency, as if she would persuade him to be reasonable; "don't you think there is something very *odd* about her? As if she were not quite sane? That pose of the Virgin Mary when she was in the moonlight as we came up? And did you notice that she's wearing quite the commonest sort of tulle scarf?"

"Yes, I'd noticed that," he began, and then their attention was snatched back to their strange visitor by the sound of a laugh. It was a clear, high laugh, but just too near the edge of emotion for a person under suspicion of madness.

"I must see to this," Harrison murmured to his wife, and took a few steps towards Lady Ulrica and the mysterious visitor. He was a connoisseur of feminine beauty, and he had been struck by what he mentally termed the "exquisite accuracy" of the profile presented to him. It had come clear and sharp against the background of the plantation, white and vivid in the moonlight; a forehead in a vertical line over the delicately rounded chin, a perfectly curved aquiline nose and the suggestion of a fine, sensitive mouth. Harrison saw it as the considered and patient modelling of some idealised profile in a cameo. It was a type that he very greatly admired; and this sight of her beauty perhaps softened the asperity of the cross-examination he had intended.

He came within a few feet of her as he began to speak, but she was still within the black shadow of the trees and he could no longer distinguish her features.

"We—we are rather at a loss, my dear young lady," he said. "You understand, I hope, that if you find yourself in any perplexity, my wife will be delighted to offer you our hospitality."

Instead of answering him she put out her hand towards Lady Ulrica, but when that lady made a responsive movement, the stranger shrank away again.

"They don't help me," she murmured. An undercurrent of agitation was coming into her speech, and began to dominate it as she continued, more hurriedly; "I can't help it, if they won't believe me. They're antag—antago—tell them to be still—in their thoughts—in their. . . ."

Her voice died out, fluttering down through the original quality of huskiness that had first distinguished it, to a hoarse, diminishing whisper. And it seemed at the same moment as if she also were stealthily retreating, sliding away from them.

“Look out! She’s going!” Harrison cried out. “We mustn’t let her get away like this. She’s—she’s not safe to be left alone. We must catch her.”

But already the stranger was nearly out of sight. For an instant they saw her through the darkness, as an illusive pillar of faint light gleaming among the profound shadows of the yews; a pale uncertain form that vanished even as they started in pursuit.

“I’m going to get to the bottom of this,” Harrison announced with determination as he led the search.

Yet, from the very outset, that search was the most perfunctory and futile affair. The members of the party, two of whom stayed behind, exhibited a marked inclination not to separate. Outside, in the security of the moonlight and each other’s society, they had suffered mystification, wonder, perhaps an occasional thrill of apprehension, but not that peculiar quality of fear that lay in wait for them the moment they entered the gloom of the plantation.

2

Even Greatorex felt that influence. He had followed his host, in advance of the other three, but lost sight of him directly he entered the cover of the trees. He started violently when a twig brushed his face, and then, with a just perceptible note of alarm in his voice, called out:

“Hallo, Harrison! You there? It’s so infernally dark!”

Harrison answered him with a remarkable promptitude

“Hallo, G.!” he said. “That you? I’m close here! I’ll wait for you.”

They were as a matter of fact separated only by the spread of a single yew.

“Don’t see that we stand much chance of catching the lady in a place like this, Harrison,” Greatorex remarked when they had joined company. “You might hide a platoon under these trees in this light, what?”

“Only a narrow belt of it,” Harrison replied. “We’ll be through on to the shore of the lake in ten yards. We can see her then for half a mile if she’s come out.”

“All right,” Greatorex agreed, and added in a mood of sudden confidence; “Beastly weird sort of place, this, but it’s been a weird sort of affair altogether.”

“Mad woman,” commented Harrison with a touch of vehemence.

“Queer, certainly,” Greatorex agreed. “But why did you say hoax, just now? You don’t think that. . . .?”

They had been talking in interrupted snatches as they pressed their way, keeping close together, through the stubborn resistance of the yews, but as Greatorex’s sentence tailed away with a suggestion of cutting off his own suspicions, they came out on to the long grass that bordered the lake.

Harrison stopped, and gave a sigh that may have indicated his relief at getting clear from the intriguing opposition of the plantation.

Before them was spread the placid deep of the black water, so calm and rigid that it looked like a sheet of unsoiled and faintly lustrous ice. To the right and left of them the bank ran in a flat curve, in full sight for a quarter of a mile each way, save that it was bordered by an uneven salvage of impenetrable black shadow. But nowhere was there any sign of a flitting white shape, escaping from the charges of hoax or insanity that had been brought against it.

“Either got away or hiding in the plantation,” remarked Greatorex, after a pause during which within a suggestion of breathless eagerness the two men had searched the moonlit distances. The

wreath of cirrus had cleared away now, and the moon had reached the perfect gold of its ultimate splendour.

"Hm!" Harrison replied thoughtfully. "Not much good searching the plantation."

"Might as well hunt for a louse in a woodstack," Greatorex thought.

"What did you make of it, G.?" Harrison asked suddenly.

"Mighty queer business altogether," Greatorex replied. And then with a sudden drop in his voice, he added on a note of alarm, "What the devil is that you've got on your back, Harrison?"

"Eh? What? What d'you mean?" Harrison asked nervously.

Greatorex took a step towards him, and after a moment's pause in which he hesitated as if afraid to touch some uncanny thing, laid hold of a long wisp of drapery and stripped it from his host's back and shoulders. It seemed to Greatorex that the flimsy thing clung slightly to the smooth cloth of the dinner jacket.

"What is it? What is it?" asked Harrison impatiently.

"Looks like that scarf the apparition was wearing," Greatorex remarked, displaying it.

Harrison clutched at it eagerly.

"By Jove, so it is!" he said; "tangible proof this, G., of the lady's substantiality. Good, solid evidence of fact. They must all have seen it. Emma even mentioned it to me as being of rather common material." As bespoke he was fingering the stuff of the scarf; running it through his hands, as if he found an almost sensual pleasure in the reassuring quality of its undoubted substance.

"Why, of course," Greatorex answered, little less relieved than his companion; but anxious, now, to prove that he had never for one instant been under any delusion as to the nature of the apparition. "You never thought, did you, that the lady was a ghost?" His laugh as he asked the question had a slightly insincere ring, but Harrison was too preoccupied with his own thoughts to notice that.

"A ghost! My dear G.!" he said. "The ghost of what, in Heaven's name? No, no, she was solid enough. But what's puzzling me is whether she was insane, or whether, as seems to me more probable, the whole thing was a hoax of some kind."

"You don't suggest that Vernon, or Lady Ulrica. . . ." Greatorex began, but Harrison cut him short.

"No, certainly not," he said. "They would not be so silly. It was just a coincidence that we should have been discussing all this foolishness beforehand. No, there are thousands of deluded idiots about, of one sort or another, who have gone mad on this spiritualism business, and I think the most probable explanation is that some week-end visitor at the hotel—we've got quite a decent hotel in the village, you know, kept by a fellow called Messenger—some woman or other, a little cracked on this subject, came out here and was tempted to try a little experiment on us. Probably she didn't mean to go quite so far, in the first instance. Just showed herself in the moonlight, playing at being an apparition for our benefit. She'd be able to see us on the lawn from here. And then when we caught her, she had to play up to the part. No doubt, she recognised Lady Ulrica's credulity. Recognised her as the kind of woman that makes the fortune of the ordinary medium. And all that nonsensical talk of hers—not badly done, in a way, by the by—was just the sort of stuff they spew up at a séance. Eh? Don't you agree? What we've got to do now is to find out who it was. We'll go down and talk to Messenger tomorrow morning, and get the truth about it. He's got an uncommonly pretty daughter, by the way; and I don't think we'll take Fell. He showed sighs of being a trifle épris in that quarter, when he was down here last."

Harrison's confidence grew as he spoke, and before he had finished he had warmed to quite a glow of certainty. His excitement had something the quality of that displayed by one who finds himself unhurt after a nasty accident.

"Expect you're right," Greatorex agreed calmly.

"Well, we'd better get back to the others—with our—our evidence." Harrison looked down at the scarf in his hands, and began automatically to fold it as he spoke. "There's a path through the plantation, a few yards further up," he continued. "No need for us to tear ourselves to pieces among the shrubs. As you said, we haven't the least chance of finding the lady by this light, and the only decent thing we can do is to clear off, and let her find her way back to the hotel."

"If your theory is the right one," Greatorex commented, as they began to walk up the bank of the lake.

"Have you a better?" snapped Harrison.

"No—no," Greatorex admitted. "Can't say I have. And anyway, yours is susceptible of proof. All we have to do is to find the lady."

"Quite so," Harrison said without conviction. He foresaw, with a little qualm of uneasiness, that his failure to produce the lady might prove a difficulty in any controversy that might follow within Vernon and Lady Ulrica. If he definitely committed himself to a theory that could be upheld or discredited by the investigation of verifiable facts, he would be at an immense disadvantage should the facts go against him—as, he was ready to admit to himself, they very possibly might. He realised that in his excitement he had been too hasty.

"Of course, G.," he said on a faintly expostulating note, "of course, I may have been rather premature in assuming that this—er—visitor of ours was staying at the hotel. I—I don't in any way insist on that. It's our first chance and perhaps our best one; but there are other alternatives. We can begin with this scarf. That's our solid ground of evidence. What we have to do is to trace the owner."

"Exactly," Greatorex agreed thoughtfully.

Harrison noticed the sound of a qualification in his friend's reply.

"Well, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, oh yes; that's all right," Greatorex agreed. "I was only wondering why, after all, we should bother any more about it?"

Harrison was too clever a man to attempt evasions. He saw quite clearly that if he pretended some more or less plausible excuse such as being annoyed by the trespass, Greatorex would see through him. And he would not risk that. Instead, he took what seemed a perfectly safe line.

"To be quite honest, G.," he said, "I am fully anticipating that Vernon will claim this—this experience, as being a spiritualistic phenomenon. And—and—well, I'll admit that that attitude annoys mine. It's so childish. This seems to me a—a perfectly fair instance of the sort of thing that these credulous people take hold of and transform into what they call proof. Properly garbled, as no doubt it will be, this silly little incident will presently be figuring in the Proceedings of the S.P.R. as 'new evidence.' Vernon could dress it up to look as circumstantial as the evidence in a police-court—give all our names and addresses, and make out affidavits for us to sign—affidavits that would not contain a single mis-statement of fact so far as we can see, but taken altogether would have an entirely false significance. You know how the . . ." He broke off suddenly in the middle of his sentence. "What the devil's that?" he asked sharply.

He had paused in his walk, as was his habit when he wished to elaborate an argument, and they had not yet left the bank of the lake for the path through the plantation. What had so abruptly diverted his attention was the beginning of a sound in that airless night, a sound that, as they

waited and listened, waxed from the first insistent whispering within which it had begun, to a fierce rustling that seemed to swell almost to a roar, before it died again to the hushed sibilance of the outset.

"What the devil is it?" Greatorrex muttered.

Harrison gave a little scream of half-hysterical laughter.

"Our—our nerves must have been very thoroughly upset, G.," he said in a strained voice, "if— if you and I can be startled by the sound of wind in the poplars. They're on the island there, a big clump of them. Now I think of it, that's one of the things that made this place so confoundedly unfamiliar tonight. It's the first time I've ever been here when it has been so still that the poplars weren't talking."

"Wind!" ejaculated Greatorrex. "There is no wind."

"There has been," Harrison said, and pointed to the lake whose level surface was now flawed here and there by a tiny ripple that flashed an occasional reflected sparkle from the high moon.

"Queer!" Greatorrex ejaculated, and shivered as if he were suddenly cold.

"But, after all, why queer, G.?" Harrison expostulated, although there was still a note of uneasiness in his voice. "I—I mean, there are always, on the stillest night, these slight movements of the air. We happen to notice it because it's so particularly still."

"Uncannily still," Greatorrex murmured.

"Oh! damn it, G.," Harrison expostulated; "if you're going to get superstitious about meteorological conditions. . . ."

"It's no use pretending, Harrison," Greatorrex returned. "There *is* something uncanny about this place to-night. I'm not a superstitious man, as you know, but I don't mind confessing that I've got the creeps." He shivered again, and then added, "Come along, let's get back to your familiar house. I've had enough of this."

Harrison's only reply at the moment was a grunt of annoyance, but after they had turned unto the path between the yews he began to talk again. "Admitting," he said, "that my nerves, too, are a trifle on edge, what does that prove, unless it is that we still retain something of the emotional fear of the savage?"

"What a chap you are for proving things this evening," Greatorrex returned. "That argument within Vernon has upset you.

"They lay such stress on all these subjective reactions," Harrison grumbled, evidently continuing his own line of thought. "A normal psychology. . . ."

But at this point they came out of the plantation into the clear spaces of the meadow and were instantly hailed by Fell and Mrs. Greatorrex, who came forward to meet them.

"The others have gone on," Fell explained. "Lady Ulrica ad a kind of faint, and Mrs. Harrison and Vernon have taken her back to the house. What a time you've been!"

"I suppose you didn't find anyone?" Mrs. Greatorrex asked.

"No, no, we didn't," Harrison replied. "Only a part of the lady's apparel." and he exhibited the tulle scarf with the air of one prepared to explain a conjuring trick.

"Where did you find it?" Fell asked.

"On Harrison's back," Greatorrex said.

"On his back?" ejaculated Fell.

"Simple enough, simple enough," Harrison explained. "We'd been dodging and skirmishing about the plantation, and, no doubt, I unknowingly scraped the thing off one of the trees. Greatorrex saw it when we came out into the light by the lake."

"Yes," Greatorex commented, "and it was spread out over his coat as neatly as you please—might have been arranged there as a kind of joke."

"Herbert!" his wife ejaculated. "Do you mean that the woman was playing tricks on you; behind your back, as it were!"

Harrison clicked his tongue, as if he were facetiously re-proving a child.

"Not you too, Mrs. Greatorex," he said. "I—I give you credit for more sense. The truth is that your good husband has brought with him into this life some of the old fears and superstitions that used to rule him when he plundered and murdered on the high seas. Yes—yes—in effect that's the truth, though we may find a biological explanation for the phenomenon without accepting any theory of reincarnation. It's—it's a case of latent cell memory, and to-night it has come out very—very strongly. He can find no explanation but the supernatural. I—I assure you, when a little bit of a breeze sprang up just now and set the poplars whispering, he was absolutely terrified. It only needed another touch to set him crossing himself and calling on his patron saint.

"Oh, Herbert!" Mrs. Greatorex expostulated. "You don't really believe it was a spirit, do you?"

Everyone knew that Greatorex had married beneath him, but his wife's usual method in company was to maintain a thoughtful silence that covered a multitude of faults. That method was one of her own devising. Her husband had never attempted to correct her. Nor did he now show the least impatience either with her unusual loquacity or her failure to appreciate Harrison's persiflage.

"No, my dear, as a matter of fact, I don't," he said; "but if you ask me, our host is almost painfully anxious to prove that the strange lady was of like substance to ourselves, of very flesh and bone subsisting; I forget just how the quotation goes."

"Well, of course she was," his wife replied with an air of assurance. "What else could she be?"

"Er—er—by the way, Mrs. Greatorex," Harrison put in. "Did you—er—see her plainly? Could you by any chance describe her for—for the purposes of identification?"

"Yes, I think I could," Mrs. Greatorex said cheerfully.

"She was wearing a rather dowdy—old-fashioned, at least.— white dress, more like a negligée than anything. I thought it funny she should come out in the garden in a thing like that. But I didn't make out quite what the material was. It looked like a rather fine linen tulle worn over a white linen petticoat I thought. And she had a common scarf—but of course you've got that in your hand. . . ."

"Hm! yes," Harrison interrupted. "But her face, eh? I you happen to catch her in profile, by any chance?"

"I don't know that I *did* notice her face very particularly," Mrs. Greatorex said. "She seemed quite an ordinary sort of young woman, I thought."

They had been retracing their way across the field as t talked, and now having reached the sunk fence, filed up little flight of stone steps to the garden. Before them, across the width of the lawn the lighted windows of the drawing-room shone artificially yellow against the whiteness of the moonlight. They had returned to the influences of their own world; even the garden planned and formalised was a man-made thing. But as they crossed the short, well-kept turf, some common impulse made them pause, and with a movement that seemed to be concerted, turn back to look down over the meadow to the plantation and the solemn stretches of the lake—back to that other world, vague, mysterious and enormously still, into which they had so carelessly penetrated.,

No one spoke until Harrison, with an impatient sigh, remarked suddenly: "Oh, come along! let's get back to sanity

"Hm! Yes," Greatorex agreed.

"About time we went to bed," Harrison went on. "We be wiser in the morning."

"I suppose," Fell began as they resumed their walk to house, but Harrison cut short his speculations.

"Here's Emma coming to reprove us," he interrupted.

"She'll probably insist on our all taking something hot to ward off the evil effects of miasma."

Mrs. Harrison was, in fact, coming quickly to meet them with a brisk air of urgency; and as though she would shorten the little distance that still divided them, she called to her husband while she was still some few yards away, on a note that held the suggestion of a faint asperity.

"Charles. want to speak to you," she said.

"Are we in the way?" Fell asked as they hurried to meet her.

Mrs. Harrison looked at him for a moment as if she had been unexpectedly reminded of the fact of his existence, and then, taking no notice of his question, continued:

"That man Messenger, from the hotel, is here, Charles, with the police sergeant. They want to see you at once."

Harrison's quick mind leapt at once to a possible explanation.

"Ha! Now we shall hear something about the lady of the lake, no doubt," he said.

"It's about Messenger's daughter," Mrs. Harrison replied. "She's—she has disappeared. They are looking for her; and Messenger wants to know if they can go down to the plantation. He has apparently got some idea that she may be there."

"Oh!" commented Harrison on a falling note, and exchanged a glance of understanding with his wife. Then they both turned and looked at Fell.

He had almost forgotten the resolutions he had made an hour earlier, and was quite unprepared to meet the silent accusation that was now levelled at him.

"I—I don't know anything about it," he stammered.

"Oh, well," Harrison said. "Let's go and hear what Messenger and the Sergeant have to tell us. I suppose this means that we shall have to make another pilgrimage to the lake."

Greator, in the rear of the procession, was heard to remark that he was damned if he could make head or tail of it.

Part 3: The Explanation

1

Mr. Messenger and the Sergeant were in the drawing-room talking to Lady Ulrica and Vernon, when Harrison, at the head of the little party, entered by the French window.

Mr. Messenger's story was soon told. His daughter had left the hotel presumably between nine and ten o'clock, and had not been seen since. He explained that he was particularly anxious because she had been in very low spirits recently. For one thing, a friend of hers, a Mrs. Burton who lived a few miles away, had committed suicide about three weeks before. Also, and here Mr. Messenger looked rather pointedly in the direction of Robert. Fell; also, he believed that she had—he paused with obvious intention before he concluded—"she had—another trouble on her mind."

Harrison had listened with a preoccupied air that was unusual to him. But as the hotel-keeper finished his story, he warmed again to his usual alertness.

"I must tell you, Messenger," he said, "that we have only this moment come up from the lake, all of us. And we saw no sign of your daughter there, but we did meet another young woman, a

perfect stranger to all of us, who behaved in—er— in a rather odd manner. Might I ask you if you have anyone staying with you who at all answers that description?”

“We’ve no one staying in the house at all this week-end, sir,” Messenger replied.

“And do you know of anyone, any stranger staying in the village?”

“There’s no one, sir, to my knowledge,” Messenger said, and went on quickly: “But have I your permission now, sir, for me and Mr. Stevens to go down to the plantation, and—and the lake?” He paused before he added in a lower tone, “Though I’m afraid we’ll be too late. She’s been gone, now, for more than three hours.”

“But we’ve just come back from the plantation, all of us,” Harrison protested. “If she’d been there, surely we should have seen her?”

“Not if she’d. . . . if she’d been. . . .” Messenger began, and stopped abruptly, putting his hand to his throat as if his words had choked him.

Stevens, the police-sergeant, shifted his feet uneasily and looked half-appealingly at Mrs. Harrison. “Mr. Messenger is afraid as Miss Phyllis may ’ave—may ’ave done what her friend Mrs. Burton did,” he explained.

Mrs. Harrison got to her feet with sudden effect of tense emotion, but before she could speak her husband cut in quick by saying, “We’d better have the electric torches. Will you get them G. and I will go, too. Will you Vernon?”

“Certainly,” Vernon said. There was a light in his eye that was hardly indicative of horror or even of pity.

Harrison turned away from him with a movement of disgust. “And Fell? Where’s Fell?” he asked.

But Fell had already left the room.

“He went out by the window, a couple of minutes back, sir,” the Sergeant said.

Charles Harrison was at all times an impatient man, and there were occasions, as in the present case, when his nervous irritability completely overcame him. He was seriously distressed by the thought that Phyllis Messenger had in all probability committed suicide. That touched him on his human, generous side. But the thing that had finally upset him had been the look on Vernon’s face; rapt, faintly mystical, the look of one who believed that a very miracle had been performed for his benefit. Harrison could not endure to remain in presence for another moment.

“I’ll—I’ll go on and see what’s become of Fell,” he mumbled as he fairly scuttled out of the room.

Once outside, he began to run. He wanted to think, but his mind was full of exasperation—with Vernon for his of triumph, with the unfortunate Phyllis Messenger, with the vacillating Robert Fell as the immediate cause of the whole disaster. It seemed to Charles Harrison as if a fortuitous coincidence of events were conspiring against him to produce the illusion of a spiritualistic phenomenon. He did not believe for one moment that the stranger he had seen by the plantation was the spirit of the drowned Phyllis Messenger, but he foresaw the kind of case that Vernon would make out, and the effect it would have upon all the other members of the party. He could not even be sure that his own wife might not be influenced. When that confounded Stevens had hinted at the probability of this girl’s suicide, a very queer expression had come into Emma’s face, just as if she had suddenly realised some strange, significant connection between the possibility of the girl’s death and that other experience earlier in the evening. He had cut hurriedly into the conversation for fear that she might say something foolish. . . .

No, no, the girl could not, must not be dead. They would find her somewhere. And yet, so great was Harrison's foreboding that he never paused a moment by the yews, but hurried straight on to the shore of the lake. He had seen nothing of Fell. He had indeed forgotten all about him.

The night was still clear, but it was no longer frozen into that rigid immobility which had earlier produced an strange an effect of expectancy. There was a perceptible movement of air from the west, the familiar voices of the poplars maintained a perpetual background of sound, and when he had come through the plantation to the edge of the lake, he could hear the minute clashing of the reeds as the chasing ripple of the water set them gently swaying. The air of mystery had fled. He no longer felt the least influence of fear. The dread that he might presently see something that heavily floated, rocking and pressing against the rushes, was more the dread of annoyance.

But there was no one in sight. Nothing moved on all the long curving reaches of the bank. There was no sound in the night other than the faint crash of the reeds, the soft chuckle of the water and the steady insistence of the sibilant poplars.

And search as he would up and down the brooding sweep of the dark water, damascened here and there by the yellow silver of moonlight reflected from the crest of the increasing ripple, he could see no slender raft of floating drapery, nor any sign of a sodden form, nearly immersed, sagging inertly towards the bank.

He desisted presently, and sat down to consider the whole situation. The sense of exasperation had faded under the influence of the night's peace, and he fell into a calmer consideration of the problem that was vexing him. He saw that he must take the initiative, state his case before Vernon could get a word in. He would treat the afflir as an instance of the kind of thing that gets worked up into what these people absurdly called "evidence." The coincidence of this stranger, (whoever she was,) turning up on the very evening on which that unhappy girl had drowned herself—if she had sunk, they would have awful job to recover the body; the lake was over forty feet deep in places—was just another of those coincidences that had probably been responsible for most of the superstitions about the appearance of the spirit at the moment of death. And in this case it was obviously absurd to argue that it was the spirit of Phyllis Messenger they had seen. *And heard!* That was a good point. Finally and conclusively, there was the tulle scarf; real and solid enough. No one had ever heard of a spirit leaving such material evidence behind it. What had he done with that scarf, by the way? He had had it in his hand when he had entered the drawing-room. He'd probably laid it down there, somewhere. He must make enquiries about that as soon as he got in. It might help him to trace the identity of the stranger.

He had wandered a quarter of a mile or so away from the path through the plantation, and he jumped up now, with the intention of getting back at once to the house, in order to make sure of that valuable piece of evidence. But as he came out of his preoccupation, his attention was arrested by the distant murmur of little detached sounds, the separated a notes of human voices, musical in their remoteness, faintly impinging upon the textured whisperings of the night.

They are still looking for that poor girl, he thought with a twinge of remorse for his own loss of interest in the search. But even as he started to join them, he realised that the sounds were retreating, fading imperceptibly into the depths of the night. Have they found her, I wonder, he murmured to himself, thinking still of a desecrated and draggled body; and then he heard himself being distantly hailed in the strong, cheerful voice of his friend Greateorex.

"Ahoy there, Harrison; Harrison, ahoy!" he was shouting.

It was not in the least the voice one would expect from a man who had so recently stood in the presence of the dead.

“Ahoy! Hallo! Where are you?” Harrison shouted in return.

The next minute he saw the tall, athletic figure of Greatorrex coming towards him along the bank of the lake.

“Been looking for you everywhere,” Greatorrex said as he came within speaking distance. “We’ve found the lady.”

“Alive?” gasped Harrison.

“Rather. Not exactly hearty, perhaps, but she’s all right. Well enough, in any case, to walk back to the house in the company of her father and Fell.” He dropped his voice confidentially as he added: “Seems that it’s a case with Fell. What? We found ’em together, you know, in a cosy little place among the yews, not five yards from the spot where the mysterious lady came out. Perfect little tunnel up to it, too. If we’d happened on it at first, we’d have found the girl there and saved all the trouble. Fell knew all about the place, it seems. Went straight to it and found Miss Messenger in a faint, or just recovering from it.”

“How long had she been there?” Harrison asked sharply.

“All the time, presumably,” Greatorrex said.

“Come there to meet Fell, eh?”

“Seems probable. And we spoilt his little game by coming too, I suppose. However, he’s owned up now. Made a clean breast of it, and declared his intention of marrying her; in the presence of live witnesses. Quite a dramatic little scene there was. Old Messenger was almost overcome.”

Harrison did not seem to have been attending to this speech, for his next question was:

“You didn’t find anything else there, did you? No apparatus of any kind, such as a mask or attempts at a disguise?”

“Lord, no. I didn’t see anything, and I was the first to get to them,” Greatorrex replied. “But why? You don’t think. . .”

“That she may have been prepared? I do,” Harrison said emphatically. “She’d made an assignation and come ready to pass herself off as someone else if she were caught—which she very nearly was. Showed herself in the first instance in order to attract Fell’s attention, and unfortunately for her brought the whole party out.”

“Oh! no, no, Harrison. No, I don’t think so,” Greatorrex said. “You’ve got that blessed apparition or whatever it was on your nerves. But, honestly, that explanation won’t do. Why, the girl was half-unconscious when I found ’em.”

“Put on,” Harrison interpolated.

“Impossible,” Greatorrex replied. “When we got her out into the open, she was still as white as a sheet.”

“Effect of moonlight,” commented Harrison.

“No,” Greatorrex’s tone had a quality of great assurance. “No, she was recovering from a faint all right. There can be no question of that. Besides, what could be the point of all that make-believe after she was found?”

“Well, she may have fainted after she’d fooled us,” Harrison suggested. “Overwrought, you know.”

They had been making their way steadily back to the house as they talked, but Greatorrex stopped now in the middle of the meadow, and took Harrison by the lapel of his dinner-jacket.

“Bad line, my friend,” he said gravely. “Take my advice and don’t attempt it before Vernon. I’m advising you for your good.”

“Well, then, who the devil was it?” Harrison snapped impatiently.

"Ah! there you have me," Greatorex said.

"But, good God, G.," Harrison expostulated. "*You* don't believe that it was a—er—an apparition."

"Dunno what to think," Greatorex said.

Harrison blew a deep breath of disgust. "I thought you had more sense," he snapped out.

"Well, I'm willing to be convinced," Greatorex replied; "if you have any other explanation to offer."

But Harrison had nothing further to say in the matter just then. He wanted to see Phyllis Messenger first, alone. When he had got his evidence, he would be ready to offer his explanation.

They found only Mrs. Harrison and Mrs. Greatorex in the drawing-room when they entered by the French window. Messenger, his daughter, Stevens and Fell had gone back to the hotel, she explained, and Vernon and Lady Ulrica were in the morning-room, conferring, so Mrs. Harrison suggested, over the events of the evening.

"I don't quite know whether Mr. Fell means to come back," Mrs. Harrison concluded with a lift of her eyebrows. "He seemed—well; rather ashamed of himself altogether. I'm not sure that he hasn't taken his things."

"Just as well, perhaps," her husband said. And then his observant glance fell on the tulle scarf thrown over the back of a chair.

"Did you find out whom that belonged to?" he asked sharply.

"Oh!" ejaculated Mrs. Harrison. "They left it behind after all. It's Miss Messenger's. She identified it at once and wondered how it had got here."

"Certain it was hers, I suppose?" Harrison asked.

"Oh yes! It's got her initials worked on it," his wife told him.

For a few seconds Harrison stood thoughtfully drawing the scarf through his hands, then dropping it back on to the chair, he said: "That's all right, then. Hadn't we better be going to bed? It's after one o'clock."

2

'When Charles Harrison set about the investigation of that night's mystery, he was still intent upon the theory that the appearance he had seen and spoken to was in fact the living personality of some stranger who had been staying either in the village or possibly at Orton Park, the grounds of which sloped down to the other side of the lake. 'There were a couple of canoes and a punt in Lord Orton's boathouse, and the crossing presented no real difficulty. He was, however, finally deflected from that theory in the course of his interview with Miss Messenger.

He had been quite firm at breakfast, As a result, no doubt, of the 'conference' they had held the night before, Lady Ulrica and Vernon were eager to begin an immediate discussion of what they called the 'phenomenon.' Harrison effectively stopped that.

"No! no!! no!!!" he said, putting his hands over his ears as soon as the topic was opened. "Now, Vernon, you profess to be scientific in your investigations. You—you insisted on that in your—er—lecture under the cedar last night. Now listen to me. I promise to thrash this out with you—presently. To—to discuss the thing in all its bearings. But I at least mean to be thorough and careful in my methods. Give me to-day to examine the case. I must cross-examine the principal witness—er—alone. Yes. I insist on that. You'll have the very best intentions, of course. I don't doubt it. But you'll offer suggestions—unconsciously, perhaps, but you'll do it."

"And you?" Vernon replied. "Won't you put suggestions into the examinee's mind, too?"

"Hm! hm! You'll have to trust me," Harrison said, "I assure you that I only want to arrive at the truth of—of the actual facts, you understand. I want to know what Miss Messenger was doing down there for three hours or more. And if you want me to discuss the thing with you, you must let me get at the facts in my own way. I—I make that a condition. If you won't agree to it, I shall refuse to discuss the thing at all."

"Oh, very well," Vernon agreed.

And Harrison had gone off to the hotel after breakfast, in the cheerful state of mind of one who has good reasons to hope for the best.

Miss Messenger received him in the private parlour of the hotel, a room that evidenced her desperate efforts to alleviate the influence of the original furniture.

She professed to be completely recovered from the effects of her adventure, and indeed she displayed no sign of illness. Her engagement to Robert Fell was, it seemed, an understood thing, and she received Mr. Harrison's congratulations with the air proper to the occasion. Harrison, who had only known her very slightly hitherto, decided in his own mind that she was a very charming young woman, and came at last to the purpose of his visit with a slight effect of apology.

"I—I don't know whether you have heard, Miss Messenger," he began, "that we had another visitor in the plantation last night."

She opened her eyes at that, with a genuine surprise that could not be mistaken.

"Didn't Mr. Fell or your father say anything to you about it?" Harrison continued.

She looked at him with obvious perplexity. "About another visitor?" she repeated. "No, they haven't told me anything. I don't quite understand."

"I—I'll explain in a moment," Harrison said. "There are just one or two little questions that I'd like to ask you first, if you don't mind?"

She shook her head with a sigh. "No, I don't mind," she said. "I suppose as a matter of fact you know all about it already?"

"Something," Harrison agreed, shrewdly guessing at her meaning. "So far as you and Mr. Fell are concerned at least. But—well—I'll tell you in a moment why I want to know—could you say what the time was when you got to the plantation?"

"A little before ten," she told him. "I heard the stable clock in Orton Park strike after I'd been there a few minutes."

"Hm! hm! And what did you *do* exactly between ten clock and—er—half-past twelve or so?" Harrison enquired.

Phyllis Messenger's face glowed suddenly red. "I—I don't know," she said after a marked pause.

"Did you go to sleep, for instance?" Harrison asked with a friendly smile.

She shook her head. "It wasn't a sleep," she said, and then went on quickly; "Oh, you said you knew—something. Don't you know how—how unhappy I was?"

Mr. Harrison turned his head away and stared at the ferns in the fireplace. "I've heard something," he murmured.

"About my friend Rhoda Burton?" Miss Messenger said.

"Ah! yes. She—she committed suicide about a month ago, I believe?" Harrison mumbled.

"Well, I meant to do that, too," Phyllis Messenger burst out with a sudden boldness. "In there, where they found me. I meant to—to strangle myself with my tulle scarf. I tied it round my neck and I meant to do it. And then I couldn't."

“Yes?” Harrison prompted her gently.

“Oh, and then I threw it down—the scarf, I mean—and everything went black. I thought I was going to die. I went down on my knees and tried to pray. I don’t remember anything after that until—until they found me.”

Harrison’s agile mind seized the significance of this evidence in a flash. At one stroke it eliminated the probability of that scarf having been worn by a stranger. If the scarf had lain there by the side of the swooning Miss Messenger, no one but a mad woman could have callously picked it up, worn it and postured before a group of half a dozen people without making the least mention of the helpless figure to whom it belonged. For a moment he played with the thought of a madwoman, but dismissed it. If there was a madwoman in Long Orton or the neighbourhood, he would have heard of her.

He sighed heavily, and chiefly for the sake of giving himself more time, said, “You’re quite sure you had the scarf with you?”

“Well, of course,” Miss Messenger replied. “I only bought it last week;” and added with a shudder, “but I don’t ever want to see it again.” There could be no question of the vividness of the unhappy memories associated in her mind with that particular article of apparel.

“It doesn’t follow, however,” Harrison went on thoughtfully after a perceptible pause, “that because you have no memory of anything after you fainted, you never moved from the spot where you were found?”

Miss Messenger shrugged her shoulders. “I can’t say anything about that, can I?” she asked.

“You see,” Harrison explained, “earlier in the evening, it may have been about eleven or thereabouts, my friends and I saw someone down by the plantation, and—and went down to investigate. And there we met and spoke to—er—someone who was unquestionably wearing your scarf—which she later discarded. It was found later by myself, as a matter of fact.”

How very extraordinary!” was all Miss Messenger’s comment. Her surprise and interest, however, were beyond question.

“Inexplicable,” Harrison agreed.

“But who *could* it have been?” Miss Messenger besought him.

“It could, so far as I can make out, only have been yourself—in a trance,” Harrison replied. He instinctively disliked the sound of that last word, but could find no other. People who have ‘swooned’ or fainted do not walk about in that condition. “Er—you’ve never, I suppose—er—been in that state of unconsciousness before?” he went on quickly, as if to obliterate the effect of the too suggestive word.

“Not actually,” Miss Messenger said, hesitated, and then continued: “but I’ve—felt queer once or twice lately.”

“Queer?” Harrison prompted her.

“As if—as if I were going off like I did last night, she explained. “Only lately, though. Only since my friend died.”

“Mrs. Burton?”

She nodded.

“Hm. Very sad, very,” said Harrison, getting up, and then he added: “It was very good of you to answer my questions and I think, now, that I am satisfied as to the identity of the stranger. You must have walked in your trance last night, Miss Messenger, and made your way back again to the place where we found you, dropping your scarf on the way. You must forgive us for not recognising you in the half-light.”

Miss Messenger had no comment to make on that explanation. It was evident that she was not in a position to deny his statement, even if she had had the desire to do so.

And after that interview, Harrison began to see his way quite clearly. When he left the hotel he visited the scene of night's encounter in order to make a thorough examination the place itself, and especially of that curious little enceinte among the yews where Miss Messenger had been found. He thought it possible that he might discover fresh evidence. No fresh evidence, however, rewarded his investigation.

3

He was, nevertheless, in very good spirits at dinner that night. The discussion had been postponed by common consent until the evening, but he once or twice referred to it in the course of the meal.

Greatare, noting his host's almost gleeful manner, asked him if he had got new and conclusive evidence in the process of his investigations, but Harrison refused to answer that.

"No, no," he said. "We'll have it out after dinner. Vernon has got his case, and I have mine. We'll argue, and then put it to the vote. Do you agree, Vernon?"

Vernon, no less confident than his antagonist, agreed willingly enough, and later, when they were all gathered together in the drawing-room, he agreed also to open the discussion.

"It's all so clear to me," he said. "I cannot see how there can be two opinions."

"Well, fire away," Harrison encouraged him. Vernon leaned back in his chair, and clasped his hands behind his head.

"I postulate to begin with," he said, "that we were all in precisely the right, expectant, slightly inert condition necessary to the production of phenomena. We were sitting in a circle, and our conscious minds were completely occupied with the subject of spiritualism. We were, in fact, according to the common agreement about such things, in the state that best enables us to assist any possible manifestations by—by giving out power.

"The chief medium in the case was unquestionably the unconscious person of Miss Messenger. She was in what I may call an ideal trance for the purpose of manifestation. Also, by an extraordinary chance, her body was secluded and in darkness. If the conditions had been planned by experts they could hardly have been improved upon. After that our explanation of the apparition and of the 'direct voice' phenomena is largely dependent upon precedents.

"With regard to the first, I claim that von Schrenck Notzing's photographs taken in Paris and elsewhere in 1912 and 1913 have sufficiently demonstrated that in favourable conditions and with a sensitive medium, a form of matter, not as yet scientifically described, may be drawn from the body of the medium and used by the external agency to build up representations not only of the human form, but also of familiar materials. I mention that in order that we may not be in any way disturbed by the fact that the materialisation was dressed in a gown of different colour from that worn by Miss Messenger. That gown too was instantly woven out of the creative flux.

"Indeed, the only thing that was not so momentarily created and re-absorbed was the tulle scarf. That must actually have been taken from Miss Messenger's unconscious body and handled by the temporary form evolved out of the teleplasm. There is good precedent for that, as I believe I said last night."

He paused a moment and then, as Harrison did not immediately reply, he added: "And if we are all agreed, after we have finished our discussion this evening, I would like to have separate written accounts from each of you as to your sight of the phenomenon; those, backed by the

evidence of Mr. Messenger, his daughter and the police sergeant, ought, I think, to establish one of the most remarkable and convincing cases ever reported to the S.P.R.”

“Steady, steady, Vernon,” Harrison put in. “I can’t say that I’m absolutely convinced as yet.”

“What’s the alternative explanation?” Vernon asked.

“That it was Miss Messenger herself whom we saw in a state of trance,” Harrison said. “You see I concede you the trance.”

“But, my dear man,” Vernon expostulated, “the figure we saw by the wood was not like Miss Messenger.”

“No?” Harrison replied. “Very well, let’s analyse the differences as observed by the various witnesses. You begin, Vernon. Was there any difference in height?”

“None to speak of that I noticed,” Vernon admitted, “but that woman had a distinctly more spiritual face than Miss Messenger.”

“Anything else?” Harrison pressed him.

“We only saw her for a few moments, of course,” Vernon said. “I must confess that at the moment I can’t think of any other marked differences. It—it was another face and expression, that’s all.”

“And you, Emma,” said Harrison, looking at his wife.

“I couldn’t be absolutely sure that it wasn’t Miss Messenger,” she replied. “We were all in rather an excited state just then, weren’t we?”

“But the dress was a different colour,” put in Mrs. Greator. “That first woman was in white. Miss Messenger had a grey dress on.”

“I think, you know,” her husband continued, “that Vernon rather hit the mark when he said that the first girl had a more spiritual face. That was what struck me.”

“Haven’t you any comments, Lady Ulrica?” Harrison asked.

Lady Ulrica sighed. “I’m afraid,” she said honestly, “that for observations of that kind, you can’t count on me one way or the other. I’d left my glasses under the cedar, and I’m as blind as a bat without them.”

Harrison smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “Well, come, what does it all amount to?” he asked. “Is there any reason in the world why we should resort to so far-fetched an explanation as the supernatural? Let us consider the evidence as if we were going to put it before a body of expert opinion. We were, according to Vernon’s own admission, in an “expectant, slightly inert condition.” We had been talking spiritualism for an hour or more after dinner, in very exceptional conditions. I never remember a stiller or an—er—more emotional night. When we were all worked up by Vernon’s eloquence into a peculiar state of anticipation, we saw a white figure down by the lake. It was inevitable, in these circumstances, that we should approach it in a state of emotion. And what did we find? We found a young woman walking in trance. Well, that state had very naturally altered her usual appearance, given her face a more spiritual expression. No doubt, she was very pale. She told me this morning that she had contemplated suicide just before she fell into this trance, and I conceive it as being probable that her highly disturbed mental condition had reacted upon her physical appearance.

“Now let us consider what actually happened. Three observers, Emma, Fell and myself, had seen Miss Messenger before and failed in those circumstances to recognise her. Is that a very remarkable failure when we give due weight to our own excited anticipations, coupled with the fact that the girl was in an altogether abnormal physical state? Furthermore we find that four people fail later to recognise Miss Messenger as the original of the supposed stranger. Of these four, one admits that she cannot be trusted as an observer of the details, another that she hardly

noticed the stranger's face. A third, Vernon, cannot deny that he was the victim of a prepossession, that he anticipated a spiritualistic phenomenon and he is not therefore a reliable witness. The fourth is our friend Greateorex. Now, G., I ask you in all seriousness whether you would be prepared to swear on oath that the figure we saw for a few seconds in the moonlight down by the yews could not have been Miss Messenger in a state of trance. On your oath, now."

"No, Harrison, I would not be prepared to swear that," Greateorex said. "In fact, I believe you're right about the whole affair."

"But the dress, Mr. Harrison," Mrs. Greateorex put in. "That woman by the wood was in white. Miss Messenger was wearing a grey dress."

"The effect of moonlight, my dear lady," Harrison replied. "Moonlight takes the colour out of everything." As he spoke, he got to his feet and took a turn up the room. As he had argued, the conviction of the truth of his theory had been steadily growing in his own mind. He wanted, now, to clinch the thing once and for all, eliminate the last possibility of sending in a report to the S. P. R., and lay the ghost for ever. But as he reached the end of the room his eye fell on the tulle scarf left by Miss Messenger on the previous night, now neatly folded by the housemaid and laid on a table by the window. And he realised in an instant that the confounded thing was grey and matched the colour of Miss Messenger's dress. Why then had that scarf also not appeared white in the moonlight? It meant nothing; no doubt he might be able to evolve some explanation, but at the present moment it might most vexatiously complicate his case. Everyone, strangely enough, had recognised that scarf. It was the one thing that had appeared to be unaltered by the unusual conditions.

Harrison was intellectually honest, but the temptation to suppress that piece of evidence was too strong for him. As he turned, he was between the table and the rest of the party, and he stretched his hand out behind him, and surreptitiously crammed the scarf into the pocket of his dinner-jacket.

But his peroration was spoilt. The enthusiasm seemed to have been suddenly drained out of him;

"Hm! hm! Well, in effect," he said as he returned, "I submit that there is no reason whatever to seek a supernatural explanation of our experience last night. What do you all say?"

"Personally, I'm quite convinced that it was Miss Messenger we saw," his wife replied cheerfully.

"Very probably, I should say," Greateorex agreed.

"It certainly seems the most likely explanation, Mrs. Greateorex added.

"And you, Lady Ulrica?" Harrison asked.

"Well, of course, if you are all sure it was Miss Messenger, I don't see that there's anything more to be said," Lady Ulrica replied.

"All of us except Vernon," Harrison amended.

Vernon sighed and leaned back in his chair. "You've pretty effectively diddled my report to the S. P. R., anyway," he said.

"If no one is prepared to swear that the person we first saw was not Miss Messenger, I've got no evidence."

"There is still Fell, of course," Harrison suggested.

"I don't think we can rely upon anything Mr. Fell might say," Mrs. Harrison put in. "I'm afraid he had a reason for not *wanting* to recognise Miss Messenger just then. I don't think Mr. Fell has behaved at all nicely."

"I think we'll drop it, Harrison," Vernon said with a touch of magnanimity. "I can't say that you've convinced me, even about last night's experience, but you've got all the ordinary probabilities on your side. It's curious how difficult it is even to *plan* a perfect test case."

4

Harrison had triumphed. He ought to have been content. But the truth is that he had satisfied everyone but himself.

That confounded scarf as he began to think of it bothered and perplexed him. He stowed it away in a drawer when he went to bed, but in the small hours of the morning he found himself wide awake reconsidering all the evidence. It had come to him with a perfectly detestable clearness that if Vernon's theory was a true one, that scarf was the single piece of common earthly material that had been used in the presentation of the phenomenon they had witnessed; and it was, at least, a strangely significant fact that the scarf should be the one thing they had all seen so clearly, the one thing the appearance of which had not been influenced by their mental emotion or the effect of moonlight.

The coincidence bothered him. He could not find an explanation.

It continued to bother him the next morning. It came between him and his work. And after lunch he put the scarf in his pocket and made it an excuse to call again on Miss Messenger. There were, perhaps, one or two further points that might be elucidated in conversation with her. She had taken, he judged, almost as violent an antipathy to the thing as he had himself. The sight of it might produce some kind of shock, might just possibly revive some memory of what had happened during her trance.

When he arrived at the hotel, Miss Messenger was in the garden, and he was shown up into her private sitting-room to await her. Still thoughtfully considering the best means to approach the production of the scarf, he walked absent-mindedly across the room and began to stare at the photographs on the mantelpiece. And then, suddenly, he became aware of the illusion that he was gazing at a background of dark yews, against which was vividly posed the delicate profile of some exquisite cameo. He blinked his eyes in amazement, and the background changed to the commonplace detail reflected in the mirror. But the face remained, the very profile he had seen by the plantation, a face sensitive and full of sadness, staring wistfully out as if at some unwelcome vision of the future.

Harrison shivered. It seemed to him as if a thin draught of cold air were blowing past him. And then, for a moment, he had a sense of immense distances and strange activities beyond the knowledge of common life. He was aware of some old experience newly recognised after long ages of forgetfulness; an experience that came back to him elusive as the thought of a recent dream. But while he struggled to place that fugitive memory, the door behind him opened, and the dark curtain of physical reality was suddenly interposed between him and his vision.

He heard the voice of Miss Messenger speaking to him close at hand.

"That's my friend, Rhoda Burton," she was saying. "The photograph was taken only a week before she died. She was in great trouble even then, poor darling."