

BRIDE OF DARKNESS

MARGERY
LAWRENCE



**BRIDE
OF DARKNESS**

Margery Lawrence

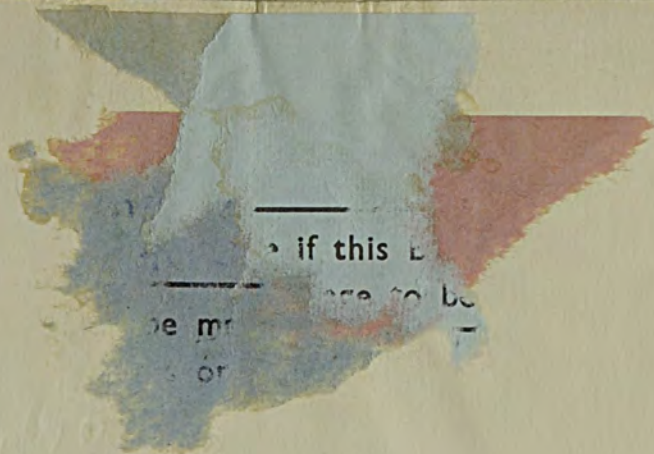
A man is married to a witch, a real-life, modern, spell-raising, potion-brewing witch. Has anyone claimed that witchcraft is dead? Gilda and her unhappy victim-husband, Chloris her rival and her foil, all come to life with startling clarity in this novel based on established fact.

Miss Lawrence has all her life been deeply interested in psychic work and the occult, and this latest work from her versatile pen is fully worthy of her art and her experience.

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By the same author

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The Terraces of Night	The Floating Café
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Cardboard Castle	Master of Shadows

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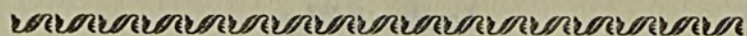
Ferry over Jordan

POETRY

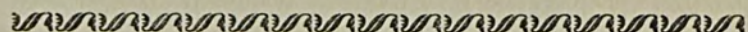
Songs of Childhood

Fourteen to Forty-Eight

Margery Lawrence



BRIDE
OF
DARKNESS



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Dedicated to Mr. X
who was kind enough to give me
permission to use his own
strange life story as the
basis for this book

*"I will encounter darkness as a bride
and hug it in my arms"*

HAMLET

CONTENTS

Foreword	9
1 Looking Back	11
2 Early Days	18
3 Enter Chloris	29
4 My Son is Born	45
5 The Notebook	57
6 Rena Takes a Hand	70
7 Chloris Talks to Me	83
8 Gilda Goes Away	94
9 Gilda Returns and Satan Shows his Power	105
10 I visit Dr. Vronski	118
11 The First Death	127
12 The Truth Comes Out	141
13 The Second Death	149
14 I Break Down	161
15 The Flash in the Dark	169
16 The Humming Bird	179

CONTENTS

1	Preface
11	Chapter I. The History of the
18	Chapter II. The History of the
25	Chapter III. The History of the
32	Chapter IV. The History of the
39	Chapter V. The History of the
46	Chapter VI. The History of the
53	Chapter VII. The History of the
60	Chapter VIII. The History of the
67	Chapter IX. The History of the
74	Chapter X. The History of the
81	Chapter XI. The History of the
88	Chapter XII. The History of the
95	Chapter XIII. The History of the
102	Chapter XIV. The History of the
109	Chapter XV. The History of the
116	Chapter XVI. The History of the
123	Chapter XVII. The History of the
130	Chapter XVIII. The History of the
137	Chapter XIX. The History of the
144	Chapter XX. The History of the
151	Chapter XXI. The History of the
158	Chapter XXII. The History of the
165	Chapter XXIII. The History of the
172	Chapter XXIV. The History of the
179	Chapter XXV. The History of the

FOREWORD

MOST readers of this book will regard it as a piece of pure fantasy, but in fact it is not.

It is the true and exact account (except in a few places where I have altered the "colouring" of the story in order to avoid any possible identification with places or people) of the marriage of the friend whom I will call, for obvious reasons, "Mr. X".

Mr. X is a scientist of considerable attainments, a fine up-standing man still only in his late forties or early fifties, and is most certainly not the man to have troubled to invent so remarkable a tale! Knowing how deeply interested I have always been in psychic matters, and feeling that perhaps it would be wise to put his story on record, if only as a warning to others, he gave me permission to use the said story as the basis of a novel. Which I have done, and I thank him most sincerely for allowing me to do this, as it has been a fascinating theme to write on, and (I hope) may perhaps deter any rash soul who is interested in magic from meddling with it.

In this material and cynical age in which we live, belief in the things accepted as a matter of course by our forefathers has gone by the board; unfortunately religion, largely speaking, has lost its authority with the masses and, more fortunately, belief in witches, spells and magic has faded out too . . . but not entirely! Those who take the trouble to find out—and they are many—how to use the lesser known powers of nature, can do so if they are willing to undergo the strict and lengthy training to which every neophyte must submit.

Magic, both black and white, can never be completely

eliminated from among us. It can only be driven underground, and even there its followers will find and make use of it! Here is a story of one instance—only one out of many—where it was used, consciously and deliberately, for evil; and though again I doubt whether it will be believed, at least I hope that it will interest whoever reads this book.

M.L.

I

Looking Back

As I look back over my life, I can see now that even before my marriage to Gilda Pirelli I was uneasy and dubious about it, although I wouldn't admit it, of course. I remember that on the morning of my wedding day, when I stood looking at myself in the mirror of my dressing-table, fixing the white carnation in the buttonhole of my wellcut black coat—very well cut it was, as I was something of a dandy as a youngster and paid plenty for my clothes—I looked at myself, and suddenly found myself wondering what on earth I was doing getting ready to go to church and get married? Why, I was only twenty-seven, and so could have gone adventuring all over the world with none to hold me back or say me nay.

Marriage would be a tie—a hindrance. I would have to arrange my goings out and my comings in with regard to Gilda, who would certainly be more exigent than my father. My life would fall into the same lines as the lives of so many of my friends who had married and set up their own homes. Going to the office at the same hour day after day, returning home to dinner at the same hour—the only variation being when friends were invited in to dine or one went to friends, or met one's wife in town and dined with her at a restaurant instead of in one's own home. Children, maybe, would add interest—but again, children were another tie and another

expense—though certainly, as I was already in partnership with my father in his business, an old and famous firm of antique dealers in Bury Street, St. James', I was not likely to have to worry about expense; so I was lucky in that.

But marriage meant good-bye to the many delightful adventures I had known abroad when I had been able, sometimes alone, sometimes with a congenial friend who shared my tastes, to wander as I chose, all over the place, from France and Italy, Germany, Russia, even China. But the country I loved best and would have liked to visit again, was Greece. I had visited Greece more than once and stayed there with my aunt, a sister of my father's who had married a Greek doctor and lived for years in Athens. Aunt Mary had been a favourite aunt of mine as a little boy, and I had been sorry when she decided to marry George Ionides and left England for his native country. She had been his second wife, and, having no children of her own, had loved and mothered his only child, little Chloris, whose own mother had died when she was such a baby that she had no real recollection of her; and Chloris had returned her kind stepmother's affection in full. So that the marriage was a very happy one until years later, when Chloris had grown from a child into a young woman, her father died and she and her stepmother were left to try and console each other.

It was after George Ionides' death that Aunt Mary decided to return to England, and so Chloris came back into my life—and of that more anon. But at the moment of my marriage they were still in Athens, in the throes of settling up old George's affairs there; and Chloris remained in my mind only as the leggy, pigtailed schoolgirl she had been when I had last seen her, some five or six years earlier than the moment of which I am speaking—the day of my marriage to Gilda Pirelli. If only I had known then what I know now—that Chloris was my true mate and not Gilda! But even had I known it, by some mysterious inner instinct, I doubt whether the knowledge would have prevented my marriage to Gilda; for at that moment she held me with a bond so tight and so

complete that any idea of breaking it would have seemed impossible.

And yet, for a few strange moments, as I stood there dressed for my wedding, something within me—I know now that it was an older, wiser Me that was trying hard to prevent my marrying this woman—knew fear, dread of the future and acute reluctance to go forward into marriage . . . and then I caught sight of a photograph of Gilda set on my dressing-table! It was taken at an angle she was very fond of, half-turned away, with her slanted eyes looking sideways from under her fabulous lashes—and instantly the moment's doubt was swept away on a tide of passion. I was going to marry Gilda—Gilda, about whom I had been perfectly crazy for months past, whose low enticing voice was music in my ears, the taste of whose full lips went to my head, the feel of whose warm body, with its high firm breasts pressed against me, sent me hot and a-quivering with desire—as she well knew. I know now that she had had every intention of marrying me from the very beginning. She wanted an English husband, and one who was decently off, and I fitted the bill exactly. She was a widow, having been married very young to a fellow-Italian, who had died after only two years of marriage, leaving Gilda his quite flourishing little business, which she had promptly sold, and returned to live with her father. She knew only too well how to waken and whet a man's appetite for a woman's body; and though—I suppose I should be ashamed to say it!—I would have gone to bed with her very soon after we met, with the greatest eagerness, being an ardent young man only in his twenties, she would not allow me to go further than an occasional kiss or embrace. She held me off while provoking me to a positive frenzy of desire—and even after I had asked her to marry me, she would not allow me more liberties than were, in her view, seemly.

I had met Gilda first through my father's association with her father. I have said that my father was a well-known dealer in antiques, and he made a special "corner", so to

speak, in beautiful glass and china. Not merely ancient glass and china, but beautiful and unusual modern pieces formed a large percentage of his collection; and in his many wanderings to find new and interesting specimens, he had come across a small shop in Milan which was showing some wonderful and most original pieces. Mostly birds or small animals, he told me, in sizes varying from quite small things to those about a foot in height, and in colouring most vivid and beautiful; and when he found that the owner of the shop, one Antonio Pirelli, had made most of them, assisted by his daughter, he was very much impressed and bought up a good deal of the Italian's stock. Which he subsequently sold at such good prices that he became a regular customer, and visited Pirelli at least once or twice a year to buy fresh stuff; and it was when I was with my father on one of his trips to Milan that I met Gilda first . . . and from that moment I could not forget her.

She was, I thought, about my own age when I met her, though later on I found she was older than I was—two or three years or thereabouts; and though I suppose she couldn't have strictly been called beautiful, she somehow gave the impression of beauty—and certainly many other people have told me that she was, as I have said, unforgettable.

She was rather above middle height, slender and graceful, with long beautiful hands that one could well imagine shaping the clay into the decorative birdshapes in which she specialized. She had a long white throat and heavy-lidded green eyes that she knew how to use, set in an oval face with the full lips so often shown in Rossetti's pictures; and she had also what I had always fallen for—a cloud of brilliantly red hair. Altogether she was rather like a walking pre-Raphaelite picture, utterly unlike her father, who was the typical potbellied, bald, loquacious little Italian. He did most of the talking to my father, while I watched Gilda dusting and arranging the display of ceramics on the glass shelves of the little window. I know now that she was quite conscious of my interest, and when I asked her how many of the

beautiful shapes she was handling had been made by her she smiled and told me "Most of them! I make most of our stock—my father taught me the technique, but my work is better, more original than his." Which I subsequently found to be true. Well, that was how it started.

I found an excuse to accompany my father to Italy on his next visit and found the redhaired girl more intriguing than ever. I will not say I'd fallen in love with her then, but I was immensely intrigued, and eager to know more of her; and when her father died suddenly, it was I who suggested that Gilda should sell the shop in Milan and come over to London to work for us. My father scratched his chin a bit, but finally agreed, and as it seemed Gilda did not want to keep on the shop in Milan, it was arranged that she sold it and came over to London and started to do regular work for us. Old Pirelli had left her not too badly off; her first husband had left her a few investments that while not bringing in much per year, brought in something quite steadily, the sale of the shop in Milan provided her with a little more capital; and certainly the popularity of her ceramic work seemed to promise a comfortable future for her. So she found a small studio-flat in Bloomsbury and set to work there.

Her "stuff", as my father called it, sold well, especially after my father had given a special show for her in a nearby gallery; which he did out of kindness to her and in memory of her father, whom he had liked very much. The papers praised her work highly, and she extended her designs to include human figures as well as birds and animals, though to my mind the human figures were never as alive and convincing as the others. So our friendship continued until I was seeing her continually and got so wild about her that I finally asked her to marry me. When I did, she put her red head on one side and considered me in silence for a moment—and when I implored her to say yes and put me out of my misery, she laughed suddenly and nodded. We were sitting by the fire in her studio, and I remember that I fell on my knees and caught her to me and held her close, with my

face buried in her white throat—and as I kissed her, passionately, feverishly, I heard her laugh again above my head. A laugh at once content—and in a queer way, triumphant.

My father didn't seem best pleased when I told him that Gilda and I were engaged. He said nothing for a long time, and then shrugged and told me that I was certainly old enough to know my own mind, and he wished me luck; but that personally, much as he liked Gilda . . . and as I was in no mind to ask him to outline his reasons for that "but", I said nothing, and we left it at that. And I must say now that beyond that hint—for hint was all that it was—that he himself would have preferred me to choose some other girl as a wife, he was kindness and generosity itself from that time onwards.

I was already junior partner in the business, and he made me a full partner; I loved the business, and having been brought up in it, was, though I say it, a good judge of the rare and beautiful things for which our firm for over a century had been famous. My father, as his wedding present to me, bought us a pretty house out in Chiswick, where at the time of writing there were still to be found a few attractive small streets where the individual houses had not been replaced by these hideous blocks of modern flats that look like up-ended concrete boot-boxes; and my father also gave us much of the furniture for it, including several handsome pieces I had long coveted from our showrooms in Bury Street. There was a small garden at the back of the house that with proper attention could be made charming, and for months Gilda spent all her spare time in making draperies, covering cushions and so on; her long artistic fingers were as clever with a needle as they were with the tools of her trade. My father's present to Gilda on our wedding day was a lovely necklace of beads made out of opals; and I did not know until long afterwards that she had refused the first present he had suggested, a handsome cross of amethysts. She refused it, she told my father, because she was superstitious about wearing crosses; and it was not until many years later that I

realized just why she would not—or rather, *could* not—wear a cross.

My Aunt Mary sent us from Greece a handsome old Ikon which was really valuable; and this, again, Gilda did not like. She hated religious symbols, she declared, and put it away somewhere, though I told her that when Aunt Mary and Chloris came to live in London, as they were planning to do, she would have to get it out and set it up somewhere, or Aunt Mary would be hurt! She merely laughed again and said that that time could take care of itself—and I forgot all about it. And so we were married, in a cloud of white satin and orange blossom, of relatives and friends and neighbours, of champagne and wedding-cake, confetti and congratulations, and went off to Italy for our honeymoon. And thus began this curious story that I propose to tell you.

2

Early Days

KNOWING that a knowledge of foreign languages was of great importance to an antique dealer, who might well have to travel to many countries hunting for choice specimens for his stock, my father had me largely educated abroad. As a growing lad I spent two years at an excellent school in France and following that two years in Germany, and another two years in Italy before I went to Cambridge and got my degree; later on, thanks to several holidays spent in Spain, I had a fair knowledge of Spanish also. So that not only helped me greatly in my chosen profession, but made my acquaintance with Gilda easier to pursue—although actually she spoke excellent English when she chose; and it also made our honeymoon, spent at a little Italian hotel at a charming seaside resort called Diana Marina perfect as it would never have been had I not spoken fluent Italian, as our host and his wife and the hotel staff spoke no language but their own.

It was April, and gorgeous weather, and we swam and sunbathed, explored the countryside round in the new car I had allowed myself to buy, ate huge meals, and of course spent an inordinate amount of time in making violent love to each other. And violent is the word! I was a thoroughly normal young man, and the physical passion for my bride that perforce I had had to repress for so many months could now find a legitimate outlet, and did.

One thing I admit, though, did surprise me, and that was my bride's prompt and passionate response to me love-making!

Remembering how almost prudish she had been during our engagement—how she would never permit anything beyond a close kiss or embrace, and how she would gently but firmly put me off, and even seem rather shocked, when I showed signs of desiring something more than this, I had visualized having to treat her gently and tenderly, almost as though she were a virgin. Although I knew she had been married before to a fellow Italian—and knowing that hot-blooded race well, I had my doubts as to whether her first husband had respected her shyness or reluctance as I meant to do!

But when we found ourselves in bed together for the first time, I was both startled and delighted—taking it, as I did, as a proof of her ardent love for me—at the fervour of her response. There was no sign of her old shyness or reluctance, and there seemed nothing she did not welcome, nothing she would not permit; so that, delighted and amazed, I flung control to the winds, and for the first part of our honeymoon, at all events, we let physical passion rule our lives to the extinction of virtually everything else. I did not, of course, suspect what I know now, which was that she was clever and cunning enough to know that to rivet a man in love to your side is to arouse him and deny him at the same time until he is so mad for you that he is ready to promise anything. And since Gilda wanted an English husband and a well-to-do one at that (and as my father's only son and heir to one of the most successful businesses in London, I was certainly regarded by women as a definite matrimonial "catch") she had every intention of marrying me instead of merely allowing a casual love affair; which had been my first intention, I must frankly admit.

So the first part of our honeymoon was—as I suppose happens pretty often with a young and vital couple—a positive orgy of physical passion that actually exhausted me considerably, strong as I was; and as time went on and I found

my wife not merely as ardent as I was, but even more so, that there were moments when that very ardour made me a little uneasy.

Though every man appreciates a woman who enjoys and responds to his love-making, when the woman in question makes it plain that she expects him to do this every single night without fail, and several times a night at that, there comes a time when the man begins to get a little worried. So that even before our honeymoon was over, I found myself more than a little worried at Gilda's insatiable appetite for physical love. I hoped it would cool down when we returned to London, as now I was in full partnership with my father I knew I should be kept very busy; and if I were awake every night until three and four o'clock in the morning making love to a feverishly passionate young wife, I doubted whether, young and strong as I was, I should be able to cope with the amount of hard work I would have to put in at Bury Street.

But to my relief, things became a little easier on our return to London. Gilda became so absorbed in arranging our new house to her liking, in training the excellent Italian cook she brought with her from Milan to cook the English dishes that my father preferred, in receiving and returning the visits of friends who came to see us and entertaining both the said friends and various business acquaintances that I wanted to cultivate, she had little time to concentrate on love-making except at night; and that I managed to handle by arranging a divan couch in the small dressing-room next to our bedroom, on which I slept when I had a hard day's work at the office and needed a long night's undisturbed sleep—or so I told Gilda.

She pouted and frowned a good deal at this, finding it hard to understand that any man in love with a woman should ever want to sleep alone; but at last she shrugged her shoulders and grimaced, and declared that she had always heard that Englishmen were difficult to live with, and now she knew it was true! And when I protested that the divan would only be occasionally used she shrugged again and

looked at me so provocatively from beneath her long lashes that I took her in my arms—well, I gave in once more, and the divan in my dressing-room remained untenanted. But later on I had reason to be glad that I had already warned Gilda that the time might come when I might need it. . . .

But the first weeks, nay months, of our life together were successful enough on the whole, and I was both happy and proud. Gilda was much admired, not only for her unusual looks, but for her gifts—for beside her brilliant ceramic work, she played both the piano and mandoline and sang endless charming little Italian songs in an attractive low-pitched voice. Everybody was very nice to us, and many of our clients sent me personal presents, which I appreciated very much; and though my father and Gilda never became really friendly, they outwardly got on together. Instinctively I knew that my father did not like my wife, much as he admired her brilliance; but he was far too fond of me, also far too much of a gentleman, to allow this to influence him towards her. I knew he missed my company and felt lonely in the large house we had for so many years shared happily together; but he remained what he had always been, courteous, kind, considerate to a degree. Which was one of the reasons why later on I learned to hate . . . but I will not anticipate.

Attached to our house in Chiswick was a garage with a room above that was plainly intended for a chauffeur's room, for it had a sink in it, a small fireplace and a couple of cupboards built into the walls; and this I turned into a workroom for Gilda. She naturally intended to keep on with her artistic work, and it was plain that to commute every day between our house in Chiswick and her old studio in Bloomsbury would not be practicable; so the studio was given up and the chauffeur's room converted into an excellent workroom. The fireplace was removed and a kiln installed in which to bake Gilda's china figures, and this, with the finding and setting up of various other necessary pieces of equipment, was rather costly; but I was determined not to hold Gilda back from continuing her work, which was now sufficiently well known for

her to be a notable figure in London's artistic circles. This pleased her enormously and me too.

I was proud of my wife and of the way in which she arrested the attention of everybody when, for instance, we entered a restaurant or any similar place. Gilda had a flair for choosing the clothes that suited her, though they were by no means always in the current fashion; and I remember one startling gown she wore at a dance one night—she and her Italian maid made it between them—which was made out of an odd length of furniture brocade in green, gold and red, stiff with gold threads; made with a tight bodice, long sleeves and a spreading skirt, in it she looked like a mediaeval lady. Especially as that night she had done her red hair, which was long—unusual in this generation of short-cropped women—in plaits wound into wheels over her ears, with a rope of gold beads woven in and out of the plaits.

As I have said, her odd and unusual looks gained her the reputation of a beauty, and the modest entertainments we gave from time to time were very successful. We gave mostly dinners of not more than eight or ten people, as a great number laid too much weight on the shoulders of Maria our one maid—even though I told Gilda to get in some assistant woman or other on occasions like these, to help her. Maria was an excellent cook and as a rule we ate Italian fashion; but seasoned traveller as was my father, he had a liking for English dishes, when he was at home at least. So when he dined with us Gilda never failed to provide him with a grilled chop and chips, a beefsteak pudding, oxtail stew or some similar dish instead of the Italian *plats* that as a rule both she and I preferred.

I soon found my feet in my new and responsible position as full partner to my father, and he gave me every opportunity to learn the ropes, placing all the responsibility on my shoulders that he felt I could handle; and knowing that on those shoulders, when the dear old man died, would rest the entire name and reputation of Randolph & Son, I threw myself into my work with the greatest zest and enthusiasm.

And I found my reward in my father's approving eyes, and in the occasional casual but much-valued comment of an old client with whom I had dealt.

"He's a chip off the old block, Ranny—got just your flair! He'll do you credit in the trade, that son of yours—got just the right touch, both with goods and customers." You can imagine how pleased I felt when I saw my father's eyes light with pride when something like this was said to him in my hearing.

As time went on there were several things I noticed about my wife that either puzzled or somewhat irritated me—and one of the things that irritated me was the discovery that she was much keener on money than I had realized! She was extravagant—which in Italian women is not usual; they are usually careful and prudent housewives.

She loved beautiful exotic things, from jewellery, furs and furniture to out-of-season delicacies in the way of food and drink; and I knew that one of the reasons why our friends came so eagerly to dine with us was that they knew they could always expect a first class meal! Londoners are poor on the whole, and will go almost anywhere as long as they are well fed and amused. And if they were well fed at dinner—and they always were—again, after dinner Gilda always managed to find something to amuse and interest them, if they were not fond of cards or television, and sheer conversation seemed to drag.

She seemed to know an enormous number of strange and interesting folk, and sometimes it would be a singer of strange and exotic songs from a little-known country who came in after dinner to give a "show"; sometimes a "magician" as she always called them, who gave a display of what I thought then must be exceptionally brilliant sleight-of-hand tricks—though now I am not so sure. Or somebody who told fortunes or could hypnotize people, and this was especially popular; and all this beside her own gifts of singing and playing, which were exceptional. Needless to say, these artists all had to be paid, and many of them charged pretty highly for their

services; and when I protested to Gilda, as now and then I did, as our household bills were higher than I liked, Gilda would remind me of how rich my father was and how rich I could be if I were the head of the business instead of being only a partner. Why, she would wonder, didn't my father retire and go and live somewhere quietly in the country, and leave the business entirely in my hands? I pointed out that the rare and lovely things he handled (many of which had now found a home with us, thanks to his generosity) were his very life; and to potter about amongst them every day, to go on the hunt for fresh treasures (which he could now do even more often than of old, since he could leave the business safely in my hands) kept him happy and in consequence healthy—I'm convinced that sheer boredom is the reason why so many ageing men develop all sorts of ailments when they retire!

Time and again Gilda urged me to try and persuade my father to retire, and when I quoted the above reasons she would sulk and flounce away, only to return to the attack another day; and I was forced to realize that far from appreciating my father as he deserved, the only thing she wanted was to push him out of the way so that I could step into his shoes and handle the business, and the large income that we drew from it, as I chose!

Finding that I was adamant on this point at last, she dropped it. But it left a nasty taste in my mouth, and little as I liked it, I realized that Gilda would welcome my kind father's death because that would mean that I was Randolph & Son, and that everything came to me! I pushed the unpleasant realization sharply into the back of my mind, but it did not disappear, and later on was to come forward again in a painful and startling way.

Gilda had one or two hobbies that struck me as rather odd. Her first husband, whose name was Giacomo Quarenghi—an odd name that always stuck in my mind—had been a hairdresser, and according to her, he had persuaded her to help in his *salon* both with hairwork and with manicure; and she

became something of an expert in both these arts. Although she had always acted as her father's assistant in his ceramic work, she had not then developed into an independent artist—she was only eighteen when she married, she told me—so she was willing enough to join forces with Quarenghi in his shop, and he must have expected her to carry it on if he died. But when she was widowed she sold the business for a good sum and went home to live with her father and devote herself to his work. She then dropped her married name and reverted to the name of Pirelli. But it surprised and rather puzzled me that she still kept up her old interest in manicure and hairdressing, though now she did it only for friends whom she offered to treat, and both I and my father were so honoured; though father did not, I could see, like having his nails clipped and polished, as he felt it was a sissy sort of thing for a man to do. I think she saw that he did not care for it, for she only asked him once to let her do his hands; and though I let her do mine a few times before our marriage, she never offered to do them afterwards—and it was not until long afterwards that I came to know the true reason for this.

Another thing puzzled me about Gilda, and that was that she would never eat salt, nor any dish that had salt added to it. I did not discover this until we were married, as when I met her in Milan we generally ate with her father and herself in the house they shared together; in which case either she prepared the meal herself, or the maid who cooked it had been trained by her to cook her share of the food without salt. I do remember noticing that when sauces were served she always had her sauce served separately; and when I asked her why, she smiled oddly and said that she only liked sauces made in her own particular way.

She maintained this, to me, rather odd habit after our marriage, and one day, out of curiosity, I tasted the sauce that was served to her and found it oddly flat. I asked her why she always avoided dishes and sauces cooked with salt, and she gave me a long rambling answer to the effect that

for years her doctors had told her that as she was anaemic, salt was bad for her; so she did not eat it. Later on—much later—I found out the real reason; and anaemia had nothing to do with it!

There was another thing which puzzled me about my strange wife—and that was that she disliked animals; or rather, that certain animals disliked her! At least, most animals did. My father and I had an old dog to whom we were much attached, a shaggy old collie we had had for years; and the first time my father dined with Gilda and myself after we were settled into our house in Chiswick, he brought Roy along with him as a matter of course. Knowing that when I left my father's house for my new life, Roy would still be there, and his silent loving companionship a great help to fill the gap left by my absence, I had of course agreed, when my father had asked if he might bring his beloved dog; and it simply never struck me to ask Gilda, concluding as I did that she would be as pleased to meet and make friends with Roy as Roy would be to meet her. But when Roy walked into our pretty drawing-room at my father's heels, the dog stopped stock-still just inside the door—and lo and behold, I saw the hair along his back begin to rise and bristle!

Gilda stood still and stared at Roy, and I rushed to greet my father and soothe the dog, who in truth was by this time looking distinctly dangerous, his brown eyes glinting and one corner of his long mouth just lifted to show his teeth. . . .

"Roy, what on earth's the matter with you?" I scolded, seizing him by the collar and trying to drag him forward. But he dug his paws into the carpet and hung back with all his weight, and now he was actually growling and shaking his head, as I held his collar, as though aching to get loose and attack—who? Dad was looking completely blank with astonishment—for as a rule old Roy was the sweetest-tempered beast in the world—but Gilda laughed on a harsh note.

"Don't try and force him, Keith," she said curtly. "He doesn't like me—dogs never do, for some odd reason!" Her eyes glinted and she went on. "I can get on with a cat, now

—but dogs and horses, no! Take him and shut him in the little washroom by the front door. Tie his leash to the door-handle so that he can't get loose—and forget him while we have dinner.”

Well, that was that—and as I never feel any household is really complete without some pet or other, I bought Gilda a kitten.

But it wasn't a black one—and it was only black cats, it seemed, that Gilda liked! I felt rather cross, as the kitten was a very expensive and quite beautiful blue Persian with a pedigree as long as your arm; but Gilda gave it away to a woman friend, and told me not to bother about another, as a friend of hers had a black kitten she could have. So the black kitten came, and though it was nothing like as handsome as the creature I had chosen, was as charming and amusing as kittens always are; though when she grew older I didn't like her so much. To my mind cats are never anything like so companionable as dogs. They come to you for food, for caresses, for warmth—but I don't believe a cat really cares a damn personally for its owners; though I know from personal experience that a dog does.

However, Gilda was charmed with it—called it Satan—and certainly it soon became attached to her, and would follow her all over the place like her shadow. So life went on, and out in Athens Aunt Mary and her beloved stepdaughter Chloris, had managed at last to settle the affairs of the late doctor, and had decided to make their home in England for the future. Aunt Mary had spent many years in Greece, and both loved the country and the people; but her stepdaughter Chloris, who in her youth had spent a long time in English schools—for her father had worked as a doctor in London for years before returning to Greece to practise there—was anxious to come to England to live. She had long shown promise as a writer, and rightly felt that in England she would have a wider field and better chances than in Greece. There women are still expected, much more than in England, to remain “*sempre in casa*”, as they say in Italy. “Always

in the house". In their father's house until they marry, then in their own.

Aunt Mary had written to my father—it will be remembered that she was his sister, and his favourite sister at that—begging him to try and find her a nice small house or flat where she and Chloris could live. He had commissioned me to share the hunt, and we had just succeeded in finding a pleasant roomy flat or rather, maisonnette, at the top of a tall Victorian house not too far from our house in Chiswick, when Gilda came to meet me with news that startled and delighted me. We were going to have a child!

3

Enter Chloris

I WAS surprised and rather puzzled at Gilda's reaction to the discovery that she was pregnant. After all, we were both young and strong and given to much love-making—rather overmuch, I have since thought—so that it would have been surprising if within the first year of our marriage she had not conceived—and I was delighted!

I had always loved children and felt I wanted one day to father a child. A son for preference, and a son is what I hoped and prayed my wife now carried; but Gilda's reaction was curious, and at times rather distressed me. Most Italian women love children and ardently desire to bear one—but Gilda was a startling exception! She varied between moods of acute dismay, and even fear, to moods in which she seemed to prefer not to talk about it; even, I felt, not to think about it; and I wondered if, as some women do, she feared the long months of growing clumsiness and lack of her normal swift grace of movement that inevitably led towards the climax of pain and stress from which would emerge that which most women long for—a baby. I tried to talk to her about this, hoping to soothe her fears and get her to regard it all as well worth while for the end we had in view, and at times she listened quietly and seemed to take in what I was trying to say; but at other times she would lose her temper and snap at me, telling me to shut up, she didn't want to talk about

it! Wasn't it enough that she was in for it—that she had to go through it, though she didn't want to? And it wasn't any use going all sloppy and sentimental about its being well worth it in the end! She wasn't a Victorian woman to be soothed with chunks of treacly nonsense, and if I went on like that she simply wouldn't talk to me at all!

At other times she would rail at her condition, simply because after a few months it would preclude her from going about to the cocktail parties, dinners, receptions and so on that she loved so much—since our marriage Gilda had developed social ambitions that at times worried me a little. Aware as I was that from the business angle it paid to do a certain amount of entertaining (and I was willing enough to do this) I was not keen on socializing on a big scale, and preferred only occasional small parties of a few intelligent friends; but it soon became plain to me that Gilda hankered to become one of London's fashionable hostesses! And as plainly this ambition had to wait until the child was born and her time and her figure were her own again, she was furiously disappointed and made no attempt to hide this.

Grumbling aloud one night after dinner when we were alone, she went for me for not having used a contraceptive, though she had never suggested such a thing; and naturally, as I wanted a child and concluded that she did also, it had not occurred to me to use one. She had done *her* best, she said, but the damn things had let her down! And when, to my dismayed questioning, she admitted that all along she had used certain things that she had been told were reliable preventives, and that she had used these things during her first marriage to prevent herself conceiving, I was shocked and dismayed. This proved that she had never wanted a child; and this was perhaps understandable in regard to her first marriage, as she admitted that she had not been in love with Quarenghi, but had married him mainly to obtain the status and comparative freedom of a married woman—he had been the most eligible offer she had received. But the idea of a

woman adored as at that time I adored Gilda, not wanting a child by the husband she had presumably married because she loved him, made me deeply disturbed—and that discovery, combined with other things, served to act as a cooling agent on my physical craze for her.

Moreover, it was at that time that she began to talk in her sleep; and when I told her about this and teased her about its waking me up, she started and seemed very much concerned! It was after that that I noted that she was much less ardent in her physical demands upon me, and even ceased to protest on the nights that I decided to sleep alone in my dressing-room. Even there, if I were sleeping at all lightly, I could often hear her talking in her sleep; but it was sufficiently far away as rarely to be clear, and even if it woke me, I could dismiss it and go to sleep again. But when I *did* hear, some of the things she said were very odd and seemed meaningless. Sometimes a string of names, names that seemed gibberish to me, or a snatch of some odd sort of music, a monotonous kind of chant curiously hypnotic—then long pauses, and between them a protest or a snatch of conversation, none of which made any sort of sense to me; and if I repeated any of it to Gilda she would frown and sit staring at me in silence, obviously displeased and—somehow, it seemed to me, frightened. Though why she should be frightened about muttering incomprehensible nonsense in her sleep, I could not imagine. . . .

But then one night I had a very curious dream.

It was hot weather, and for that reason as for others, I was sleeping on the couch in my dressing-room, which opened off the larger room that normally I shared with my wife.

I had gone to sleep at my usual time and, generally speaking, I slept like a top until Maria, our Italian maid, brought in the cup of tea that she had been taught was the habit of all English people to take before breakfast; but tonight, for some odd reason, about midnight I awoke, and lay for awhile sleepily trying to reconstruct the queer scene at which I

seemed to have been either assisting or a spectator in the dream from which I had just awakened.

I remember that in that dream it had been a warm summer night, dark and somewhere in the open, for I could smell the cool scent of leaves and grass and feel the caress of a light breeze on my hair; but I was not alone. Around me I could sense a concourse of people, though all unseen, for it was too dark to see anything at all clearly, and somehow I knew that we were all gathered in a grove of great overshadowing trees somewhere—and somehow I felt a strong sense of fear. Why on earth I should have felt like that I cannot imagine—but there it was, I did; and as I was trying to sort out why I felt so, and what could have caused the dream, as I rarely dreamed at all, I heard Gilda's voice speaking from her bed in the room just beyond mine. Her voice was hurried, fearful, but I could hear what she said quite clearly.

"Yes! Yes, I know. I failed, I did not obey the law. . . ." And then, though it must of course have been imagination, somehow I seemed to hear another voice replying. A faint, hollow sort of voice like something heard in the far distance, yet a voice with a thrill of horror about it that communicated itself to me as I listened. There was something ruthless, utterly remorseless about that voice, faint as it was.

"You knew the law, daughter, and you disobeyed it! You knew the price of entry into the" . . . now here came a word I was not sure of except that it began, I'm sure, with a "c" or a "k"—that was the sound I heard. But Gilda's voice came again, shaky, agitated.

"I know, I know—I did not pay the price—then. But hear me now, and mark that I swear to make my ancient promise good. . . ." But by this time I was feeling so thoroughly frightened that I had to put a stop to this conversation, whatever it was, and jumping out of bed, I went into Gilda's room and waked her from her sleep. She seemed to take longer than usual to wake, and when I told her what I had heard her eyes widened and she stared at me in silence for a moment—and then she laughed, though to me there was a forced

note in the laugh. Putting her arms round me, she drew me into bed with her and reassured me with her lips against mine. I'd been dreaming! Must have been, for there couldn't possibly have been any second voice for me to hear—we were alone in the house but for Maria, and she certainly was asleep in her room, she slept as soundly as any pig! I was to forget it, realize that it was only the remnant of a dream from which I hadn't completely awakened . . . and so I accepted this perforce, since there was no argument that I could find against what she said; yet somewhere in the back of my mind I was not entirely satisfied that it had all been a dream. . . .

It was not until long afterwards, when I was thinking things over and trying to piece them together in my mind that I realized that it was after that that Gilda's attitude towards me as a husband—speaking from the physical sense, I mean—altered quite definitely.

I have said that from the time when I first told her that she talked in her sleep she cooled off, so to speak, in her demands on me for the passionate love-making that during our first year had seemed to be a paramount need for her. Now, after the night of my dream, she cooled off still further, and when she permitted me my normal rights as a husband, refused to allow me to spend the rest of the night in bed with her, but dismissed me to my divan couch in the dressing-room, declaring that she had discovered she slept far better alone! With man's usual perversity I felt a certain resentment over this. It was all right when I elected to sleep in my dressing-room, but all wrong when she insisted on my doing so! But when she turned pathetic and, laying her hand upon her belly—though this was still flat, as it was the very early stages of her pregnancy—assured me that many women, while they were pregnant, preferred to sleep alone after the love-making was over, I had nothing to say. Naturally, a woman in her condition has to have things her own way—and anyway, once the child was born and she was well again, we would reconsider the whole situation afresh.

I was helped towards accepting the situation with philo-

sophy by an intimate friend in whom I confided, who assured me that I was lucky in that Gilda had not forbidden me to make love to her at all, as he had heard of women doing that during pregnancy—possibly, the psychiatrists say, out of a feeling of resentment against their husbands! So I agreed with him that in that case I was lucky, and left it at that.

So life went on, and a couple of months later the great day arrived when Aunt Mary and her stepdaughter Chloris were coming home.

I was especially pleased, as I knew how glad my father would be to have his favourite sister living somewhere nearby. I had recently felt a little worried about my father, who, normally healthy enough, had, it seemed, been having a little heart trouble now and then. Nothing very much, just an occasional slight spasm, followed by palpitations—the attacks had been short and not at all severe, but they had frightened him a little, and me too, I had to admit; and I had persuaded him to have himself overhauled by a good heart specialist. My father had at first demurred, as having been a fine strong man all his life, he had had little need of doctors; but at last he consented, and came back to me chirruping with triumph and saying that the specialist had found nothing whatever wrong with his heart! On the contrary, he had told him he had the constitution—and the heart—of an ox, and would likely live to be a centenarian. Which, needless to say, relieved me greatly—though the occurrence, a few days later, of yet another of these “heart attacks” puzzled and worried me a good deal; though not my father. The specialist had told him that the attacks that seemed like heart-trouble must be due to indigestion, to getting overtired and overstrained or something of the sort—there was nothing in the world wrong with his heart, so it couldn’t be that!

So with one thing and another, I welcomed Aunt Mary’s arrival with all my heart, and escorted her and Chloris, after meeting them at the airport when they landed from Athens, to the charming home we had found for them, with the greatest satisfaction.

They arrived, needless to say, with a positive mountain of luggage, which was being looked after by their maid, Rena, otherwise Irene—a gaunt giant of a Thessalian woman, who had been George Ionides' foster-sister, and who had loved and served and looked after him, and now his wife and daughter, with a devotion truly amazing. I had met her, of course, on my visits to Athens to stay with Aunt Mary, but had never come to know her well—that was to come; but I greeted her warmly so that her lined brown face relaxed into a faint smile as she answered my greeting in excellent English. I was glad that she had been willing to leave Greece and come with Aunt Mary, as I knew the difficulty in finding good maids, these days, in England; and as Aunt Mary was semi-crippled—lame in one leg—thanks to a motoring accident somewhere in the wilds of Greece, she was very dependent on having somebody reliable to look after her; and since Chloris would, of course, marry in time, Rena would be needed even more when her stepmother was left alone.

As we drove from the airport to Aldford Street, where the new flat was situated, I studied Chloris furtively as I drove. Having still in my memory my last sight of her, a leggy, pig-tailed schoolgirl in a very unbecoming serge gym frock, I had been positively startled to see a tall, slim young woman in a smart two-piece travelling suit of bright blue linen and a tilted straw hat to match, standing beside Aunt Mary with one hand tucked into her arm; and I had all but gaped when she twinkled up at me and, reading the surprise in my eyes, said demurely, "Yes, I'm Chloris all right. Haven't I improved?"

What I said I really don't know—something fatuous, it must have been, for Chloris broke into a soft chuckle of amusement, the most attractive laugh I'd ever heard; and as I led the way back through the crowd of new arrivals to where I had parked the car, carrying what small gear I could in my hands and followed by Rena carrying more, I told myself that I would certainly never have recognized, in this charming young woman, the gawky schoolgirl I used to know.

Chloris Ionides was tall for a Greek—the Greeks are a race of small dark people as a whole. The idea of “Helen tall and Helen fair” was a purely Roman idea—the Romans seem to have had much the same obsession with Aryan blonderness as Hitler had! Though one does sometimes meet a tall Greek, mostly those born in the northern islands, and Chloris’ mother had been tall, I was told; a woman of Macedonia, the extreme north of Greece. It is an odd and interesting fact that in most countries one finds the taller people born in the north and the shorter in the south; in France, Spain and Italy especially is this so.

I duly deposited the luggage and the three women at the new flat, over which they all waxed lyrical—which was only just as it was a charming place. (Aunt Mary had been left comfortably off, I’m glad to say.)

It was, as I have said, a maisonnette rather than a flat, being the two top floors and an attic floor above them containing two usable attics, of a tall old Victorian house that had been split into flats.

The lowest floor had a small hall, a fine large sitting-room, small dining-room and kitchen opening off it; the next floor above had two bedrooms, Aunt Mary’s and Chloris’, and a bathroom; and from this another short flight of stairs led up to the attics, which provided a bedroom for Rena and a guest-room—a room for which, much later on, I was to be very thankful! The maisonnette also possessed what few London flats possess, a balcony big enough on which to place one or two chairs on a warm night so that one could have one’s coffee there and watch the lights spark out over London.

My father had suggested that he took Aunt Mary and Chloris out to dinner somewhere that night, while Rena unpacked the luggage and got things generally shipshape in the new home. He had hinted that Gilda and I came too, but I suggested another night, knowing enough about women to know that both Gilda and the other two women would rather not meet each other until they had had time to dress and titivate up for the occasion. So I went back home to Gilda

and left Father to call for Aunt Mary and Chloris; and I remember that when Gilda asked me what Chloris was like I must have been tactless enough to do something of a rave, for I know Gilda looked at me sideways as I talked, and then dismissed the subject with a rather acid "Really, she sounds as though she ought to go in for a Miss World Beauty Competition!" And yet somehow I have never thought of Chloris as the sort of beauty that goes in for winning competitions.

She was tall, as I have said, with dark brown hair and wide hazel eyes with dark eyelashes, a full and generous mouth with a small straight nose above it, all set in a face pale with that charming mat paleness you only get with a skin that does not tan easily, only goes a faint shade of olive after long baking in the sun. She was slim but well built, with small elegant feet, and hands that were innocent of the blood-coloured varnish that most women wear, and which I have always hated; though Gilda insisted in putting it on her nails except when she was working in her studio. The fact that Chloris did not use the stuff brought about a rather curious *contretemps* later on, when she and Gilda met, that I will recount at its proper moment.

Father rang me up at about ten o'clock that evening. He had thoroughly enjoyed his *dîner à trois* and had just dropped the two women back at their flat; he was full of delight at seeing Aunt Mary again and of enthusiasm about Chloris, her looks, her charms. He told me that as he had a pretty extensive acquaintance amongst Fleet Street men, he thought he might be able to get her a job of some sort on a weekly paper—even if it was only a small job, it would mean she got her foot in at least. And it meant gaining what she wanted of all things, experience and a chance of making friends and headway into the writing world. Journalism was a fine training school for a writer, though Chloris did not want to remain a journalist; she dreamt of writing novels, short stories, even plays—and the fact that ultimately many of those dreams actually came true, still gives me the greatest happiness and satisfaction; but that, as Kipling used to say, is another story.

Father ended, as he always did, by inquiring courteously after Gilda's health; I assured him that she was well and hung up the receiver, and Gilda looked at me over the handsome piece of embroidery she was doing. She hated to sit idle and cared little for either reading or television; so she was generally employed on some piece of sewing work while I did the viewing, if there was a programme that appealed to me.

"Well? I gather from the length of your conversation with him that your father is as enchanted with these two women as you are!" she commented. "So I think the sooner I meet them the better, don't you think? What about inviting them to dine here, say, today week? They will surely have had time to settle into their flat by then?"

Now you know, its an odd thing, but as she spoke I suddenly knew that I didn't want Gilda to meet Chloris! It was a totally absurd impulse which, I know now, sprang from my inner, wiser Self that already—though the dire knowledge had not yet penetrated to my conscious brain—I knew that this woman whom I had married was dangerous, and dangerous in a deep and evil sense that differed from anything else I had ever met! Shocked and astonished, I scouted the impulse at once, but for a flashing moment it had been there. Just for one moment, a split second, if you like, and then it vanished, thrust away by my conscious self; but during that moment I knew that of all things I didn't want those two girls to meet, and would have done anything to prevent it!

I was so startled that I made no answer to Gilda, and she repeated her question—what about inviting Aunt Mary, Chloris, and of course father, to dinner that day week? I agreed feebly—and so it was arranged; and exactly a week later I welcomed Aunt Mary and my cousin Chloris—though there was no actual tie of blood between us, I had always regarded her as a cousin—to the pretty little house I shared with Gilda.

Although the pleasant habit of dressing for dinner has more or less vanished now (which personally I think is rather

a pity) my father still clung to the wearing of a dinner jacket at nights, and expected me to do the same; which I noticed always pleased the women-folk, as it gave them an excuse for trotting out some of their evening clothes! And certainly our three women did us credit that night. Gilda, always faithful to her love of strong vivid colours, was in a close-fitting sheath of green and gold brocade, worn with a handsome set of jewellery, earrings and a necklet of green jade beads alternating with gold filigree beads, that she had coaxed me into giving her during our honeymoon; Aunt Mary looked charming in black velvet with a lace scarf arrangement held with a fine old cameo, and Chloris wore pleated blue chiffon made in a rather Greekish style that suited her tall slimness, and a string of old Roman pearls that had belonged to her mother before her.

We had cocktails together, and an excellent dinner followed. It was plain to me that Gilda was determined to show herself the perfect hostess, and certainly she was at her best that night. She could be charming when she chose, and tonight she was charming, and quite obviously captivated both our visitors; especially when we had had coffee and I had suggested—prompted, I admit, by Gilda herself beforehand—that Gilda should sing to us. My father asked Chloris if she sang or played, and she said she used to play the piano but was lazy about practising, so never became really expert. Gilda, who was sitting beside her on the sofa looked down at Chloris' hands and raised her brows.

"You *should* play well, with those hands," she commented, and taking up the hand that lay nearest to her, began to examine it with interest—the long fingers, the strong square palm and jutting thumb that meant strength of mind. She smiled faintly as she spoke again.

"You have beautiful hands, you know—but forgive me for saying so, but they need manicuring. Manicure by an expert would make them twice as beautiful as they are. I was trained in both manicure and hairdressing and I would so much like to do your hands some time?"

Chloris laughed as she withdrew her hand from Gilda's.

"That's sweet of you," she said, "but I'm afraid I never have my nails manicured—professionally, I mean. I keep them filed and neat and all that myself—but I can never have a real manicure."

"Why ever not?" demanded Gilda, and I listened curiously, as I had myself wondered why Chloris, who was otherwise so essentially smart and modern a young woman, never wore the vivid-coloured nail varnish as most women did.

"It's an awful bore," said Chloris, "but the truth is that my nails won't take the varnish—not even the colourless ones! Though when I first grew up I used varnishes, of course, I soon found out that I had to drop them, as they made my nails peel!" She held out her hands and showed the long square-shaped nails, pale pink, though polished until they shone, and went on.

"I had to go to an expert in hand culture, and he told me I would never be able to wear varnish, as my nails wouldn't stand the strong chemical acid that was put in them to act as a fixative for the colour. He told me to stop using them, and only use the old-fashioned buffer to keep them looking clean and shiny. So there you are!"

"That must have vexed you," I said, and Chloris nodded.

"Yes! I was very cross about it at the time, as of course I wanted to wear what all the other girls in Athens were wearing—but though I tried again and again, I had in the end to stop using it. My nails simply wouldn't stand up to it, and peeled until they were as thin as tissue paper—so I decided to be wise, and gave it up."

"Personally," I said, "I prefer nails without that blood-coloured stuff most women use on them." As I spoke I caught a sidelong glance from my wife—who, of course, was wearing that same blood-coloured stuff—that boded me no good.

"So I've heard most men say," said Chloris demurely, "though I've never noticed any of them refraining from taking out girls who wore it, all the same!"

"And I see that you don't keep your nails pointed, like

talons, as so many women do," remarked my father. Chloris laughed.

"That's perforce!" she said. "I do all my writing—letters as well as my work—on a typewriter, and long pointed nails would keep breaking as I struck the keys; and another reason why coloured varnish would be useless to me is that typing would chip and crack the varnish, and I'd have to keep on renewing it, which would be an awful bore." She shrugged her slim shoulders. "So I've had to decide to keep my nails square-tipped and without colour, and pretend I'm setting a new fashion."

"I'm sorry," said Gilda, "because I should have enjoyed doing your hands. They are beautifully shaped—and I am really rather good at manicuring and hairdressing, though that sounds like boasting."

"I can't imagine your not being good at anything you undertook," I said. I meant what I said, as Gilda was astonishingly capable; but I must admit I made the remark rather by way of placating my wife for the dig I had given her over the nail varnish. Gilda smiled as she rose and went towards the piano, beside which stood her mandoline in its polished rosewood case.

"If I can't do your hands, perhaps one day you'll let me try my hand on your hair," she said over her shoulder to Chloris. "If you fancy a new and different style you've only to let me know and I'll come over and give you a treatment—or better still, you could come here. All right?"

Chloris agreed gratefully, and seating herself on the piano-stool, Gilda drifted into singing, and for the best part of an hour we listened to a variety of delicately charming songs. Some Italian, one or two Spanish and at last two Greek, to the delight of Chloris and her stepmother—and by the time our guests stood up to go, it was plain that Gilda had won both women over completely. They shook hands with the greatest enthusiasm and made plans to meet again very soon—and altogether the evening was a huge success; only one thing happening to spoil my pleasure in it. And that was

that as my father stood waiting for Aunt Mary and Chloris to pass out of the drawing-room before him, he paused and put his hand to his heart. He had gone pale, but he tried to smile into my anxious face as I stared at him.

"Don't worry, lad," he murmured. "Just another little spasm, that's all! It'll pass off in a minute or two—don't tell the girls, they'll only worry . . ." and even as he spoke I saw the colour begin to seep back into his face as he steadied up, leaning against the door-jamb. Out of the corner of my eyes I saw Gilda standing a little way back in the shadows of the little hall, and she was watching Father with a curious and somehow rather disturbing intentness; but then my father, patting my shoulder, moved out into the landing outside. Aunt Mary and Chloris were already descending the stairs to the front door and I went out after my father.

"Look here, Father," I said—for I was more than a little troubled. "Are you sure you're well enough to drive the car home, or shall I drive you? I can easily drop Aunt Mary and Chloris first, and then you, put your car up in the garage and then get a taxi back here." But my father shook his head. No, it wasn't necessary—the spasm had passed off and he felt as right as rain again. I wasn't to worry! Probably indigestion caused by Gilda's good dinner—he'd probably eaten too much. Good-bye . . . good-bye. . . .

I saw them off in the car, and when I mounted the stairs again to our pretty drawing-room—it was on the first floor, the two rooms on the ground floor being respectively my study and the dining-room—I found Gilda emptying the ash-trays and putting the glasses on to a tray for Maria to wash and put away on the following morning. I heard her voice as she spoke over one shoulder.

"Your father had another heart-attack out there, didn't he?"

"Yes," I said. "But it was only a very slight one, thank God."

"It may be slight or severe," said Gilda, "but it seems to me that these spasms are coming more often than they used to do. Aren't they?"

Reluctantly I agreed—it was true. But the specialist had said. . . .

"I don't believe that specialists are always right," said Gilda, emptying the last ashtray into the coal-fire to which we still clung, as both of us vastly preferred "natural" fires to artificial heating; though I admit we used central heating in the main part of the house. "I think your father's got some sort of real heart trouble that they haven't found out. . . ."

My temper snapped suddenly.

"Good Lord!" I said. "You almost sound as if you wanted Father to be ill—maybe to die! I tell you, these spasms are only passing things—he was all right after a few minutes and drove off as fit as a flea!"

But Gilda was not looking at me. Tranquilly she carried the tray of glasses and ashtrays out on to the corridor outside—we had a little flap-table just outside the door on which to rest trays or other things that were being brought into the drawing-room. There she put the tray down and standing in the doorway, surveyed me up and down with a curiously appraising look.

"You're very touchy about that father of yours," she said—and there was the hint of a sneer in her level voice. "So I only hope you're right about him. And now I'm going to bed—alone, as I'm tired after this evening and want to sleep."

She trailed gracefully away towards the stairs, and I looked after her with a strange mixture of emotions in my heart. I was not sorry that she didn't want me in her bed tonight; in point of fact, as I have said, for one reason or another, nowadays we slept far more often apart than together, and I was rather startled to realize that on the whole I was not sorry for this.

The first fury of our mutual passion had worn itself out long since and, normally speaking, what should now slowly but surely be taking its place was a deep and understanding love in which sex only played a part; and young as I still was, only twenty-eight then, I was beginning to wonder whether that love was ever going to develop between Gilda and me. I had

seen real love between my father and my mother, love that was so sacred a memory that my father had never even considered marrying again after my mother's death, though he had been a fine upstanding man still only in his fifties, and many a woman would have been happy to be his wife; but he refused even to consider remarriage, saying that when one has known perfection it would be folly to hope to repeat it. And I knew that the link between my father and mother had indeed been perfect—or as nearly perfect as one could hope for in this imperfect world. They had had so deep, complete and satisfying an understanding that often they did not seem to need words to communicate with each other, a mere exchange of glances would be sufficient; and certainly nothing of that sort was developing between my wife and me. Well as I knew Gilda now, physically speaking, she was as far from me as ever, mentally and spiritually. We could talk together of business matters, of the usual town gossip, or of our friends, our plans and so on—but of things that lay nearer the heart or the spirit, never. And that night, seeing afresh how far we were from thinking or feeling along the same lines, I went to bed feeling very far from happy. . . .

4

My Son is Born

TRUE to his promise, my father introduced Chloris, at a special cocktail-party he gave for her, to several of his Fleet Street friends, and she was a great success with them. So much so that she was offered two posts—junior posts, of course, but none the less valuable for that—on two of the best daily papers; and one on a weekly which catered mainly for women. Chloris, after much thought, decided to accept the last, which was quite well paid, and Mrs. Bruce, the editor of the paper, whom I knew, was a pleasant-natured woman who would be easy to work with. Some of our friends felt that Chloris would have done better to have accepted one of the other chances she had been offered, on a daily paper—but the reasons she gave me seemed to me to be very practical ones.

It would, she thought, be less tiring working for a paper that appeared only weekly than for one that came out every day—moreover, at present she knew far more about women and women's affairs and interests than she did about politics and economics and things like that! So she was soon hard at work, and very content with her lot, as indeed was Aunt Mary; there was actually only one thing that temporarily spoilt things for both of them, and that was that their faithful Rena was obliged to return to Greece in order to cope with the sudden death of her brother, which had left his

widow and four small children stranded in the world without help.

Greeks are notoriously family-minded, and devoted as she was to Aunt Mary and Chloris, there was no thought in Rena's mind but that she must rush to the help of her brother's family. She departed amidst a flood of tears, and luckily I was able to find a capable Frenchwoman who was willing to take on Rena's work until her return, which Rena declared would be in a matter of weeks. But in fact, it was many months before she came back to London, as it appeared that her brother's affairs were in a terrible tangle; also, the future of his wife and family depended on his proving possession of a certain house, which was disputed by another brother, who happened to want the house and land in question! Altogether it was the best part of a year before Rena at last returned in triumph, having won her case, and seen her brother's widow and the children settled in their new house; which was large enough to take in a couple of lodgers, which would help the little family's finances very much. So thanks to this absence from London, Rena—who plays a large part in this story of mine—did not happen to meet my wife until after her return; and by that time our son—Noel, as I insisted on calling him, as he was born only a few days before Christmas—was born.

That strange wife of mine, all through her pregnancy, kept up her oddly moody ways, and time and again I was hard put to it to answer some of the obvious questions and comments from women who met her. My Aunt Mary, for instance, who as a matter of course had started knitting madly the moment she heard that Noel was on the way, could not understand why Gilda, who was so clever with her needle, did not trouble to make a single thing for the coming baby. In Aunt Mary's view she should, since she could not knit, have set to work to make endless frocks, slips, clothes of all kinds, of the finest materials, tucked and embroidered, as every young wife in Aunt Mary's day did as a matter of course; but Gilda, when tackled on this point, merely shook her

head and said rather curtly that making baby clothes didn't interest her—and anyway, nowadays one could buy children's things far better and cheaper than one could make them, so where was the use? Aunt Mary tried in vain to explain the pleasure she would get—at least, that Aunt Mary thought she would get—out of making things for her own baby; but she got no further, as Gilda said she preferred making her porcelain figures, and left it at that.

Instead, it was Chloris who set about making baby clothes and being, like most Greek women, a fine needlewoman, very beautifully she made them. She even made a quilted pram cover in white satin, avoiding pink or blue as we didn't know whether the baby would be a boy or girl, that was a real work of art; but though Gilda thanked her charmingly, I think both Chloris and I felt it was a purely conventional "thank you."

Gilda kept up the hectic social life she loved until the very last moment, and rebelled bitterly when at last she grew too big and swollen to be able to get into her smart clothes. Then she took to shutting herself up for hours on end in her studio and working on endless new ideas for a Show of ceramic figures that she meant, she said, to hold in the early spring when the child should be born—and she herself "free to live again", as once she sourly put it. A comment that hurt me a good deal, showing as it did that she visualized her baby as a palpable burden, to be endured as long as she could not avoid it—and then?

Even the choice of the pram and the bassinette—or whatever is the proper term for the modern version of the cradle—was left to Aunt Mary and Chloris. The pram was a handsome modern affair in white enamel and chromium with white leather lining, and so on—and the bassinette was white also, a swinging affair in white wickerwork on tall legs, with frilled curtains hanging from a projecting rod overhead and frills round the sides. Pretty enough, though I was at first rather huffed that the two women turned down my offer of the loan of a handsome wooden cradle with carved sides and hood

that my father offered me from the shop. But handsome as it was, is wasn't really practical from the point of view of a nursery, said Chloris, who had undergone a term of training in Red Cross work in Athens during her adolescence. She showed me how much more hygienic was the washable lining, mattress etc., of the modern cradle compared with the dark wooden interior of the old; and above all, how much easier it was for the nurse to have a bed for the baby that did not entail constant back-breaking stooping—and it was this, of course, that convinced me of her rightness. Though as I watched Chloris, her soft hair loosened with her exertion, stooping over the swinging cradle, I couldn't help contrasting her eager womanly interest in the whole thing with Gilda's extraordinarily detached, almost bored attitude. And even as I watched, the thought stirred in the back of my mind of how sweet Chloris would be as a mother—how lovely she would look holding a child! And if it were *my* child. . . . I know that I scouted the idea, instantly, shocked and startled at myself! But though I sent it flying, it was to recur again and yet again as time went on.

Until at last I was to realize, with a rueful sense that somehow I had known it all along, that it was Chloris that I loved and would always love—and that the passion I had felt for Gilda, now dead and withered like last year's leaves, had been nothing but a young fool's blind infatuation. But mercifully for my peace of mind, the day of that realization was yet far off—and as time went on, my uneasiness and anxiety about Gilda's odd frame of mind continued unabated, and was made worse by Father's attitude, which echoed my own.

Not that he said much to me—he was too tactful. But once when he had been dining with us, and after dinner I had started talking about the coming baby, wondering whether it would be a boy or a girl and what name we might choose, and my father had asked Gilda the obvious question—what was her favourite name? Gilda had shrugged as she set out the chessmen on the board (my father had taught me to play

chess when I was a mere boy, and we often played together) and said over one shoulder that she hadn't even thought about it. Did it matter what a child was called?

The remark was such an odd one for a woman to make, under the circumstances, that my father's jaw dropped with astonishment, and he followed up her comment with the question—wasn't she interested in the name her child was going to bear? I remember that Gilda looked at him then for a moment, her odd pale green eyes narrowed under the brows that were so much darker than her red hair; she laughed curtly and turning away, snapped out an answer to the effect that whatever name one gave a child, they would get a nickname amongst their playmates that wasn't in the least like their own . . . so did it matter?

My father said no more; but to me privately he commented that he found Gilda's extraordinary absence of interest in her coming child very odd and rather unsatisfactory—didn't I think so? I certainly did, and said so, and we both shook our heads—but what was there to be done about it? So in the end we had to shrug our shoulders and accept the, to us, inexplicable fact that here we had a healthy young woman about to have her first baby, who didn't appear to care a damn about it!

I was uneasy about my father's health, too, for despite the specialist's comforting report that his heart was in perfect condition he continued from time to time to suffer these odd "turns". Knowing that I worried about him, he did not often tell me when he had an attack in his office or when he was about the shop, and warned his devoted secretary not to mention it to me when one occurred; but now and again an attack would come on when he was with me, or with some friend who told me; and guessing, as of course I did, that he had attacks he never told me about, I could not help feeling anxious about him, and the specialist's cheerful verdict did little to comfort me.

He had given my father tablets to take, which he duly took, and warned him to take life as easily as he could—

and that was that, as far as I could see, and there was nothing else to be done. But at the back of my mind remained this secret anxiety; and it added something, as may be imagined, to my anxiety about Gilda as the months passed on and the time of her confinement drew nearer and nearer. She was to be in the care of our own doctor, Dr. Barton, a charming and able man and an old friend of ours, and he certainly looked after her assiduously; though I knew him well enough to know that he was, like the rest of us, puzzled by my wife's oddly detached air towards her coming child. Once he asked me if she had had any children by her first husband, and when—rather unfortunately perhaps—I said no, that she had never wanted a child, he scratched his chin thoughtfully and said that that perhaps explained much. He did not think that she really wanted *this* child, either, which was a great pity!

Of course (he said) many women feared childbirth for various reasons. They feared the inevitable months of feeling clumsy and unwieldy and often sick, with the inevitable suffering at the end—for even with modern drugs there was an element of pain as well as risk about childbirth. Or they feared that they might lose their figures, which had to be admitted as a possibility, though with modern techniques and post and prenatal care, the likelihood was much less than in the old days. But it was odd that in a woman of Latin blood these fears were not overcome by anxiety for the interest in the coming child, as, generally speaking, the women of those races were far keener on maternity than the more frigid Englishwoman—and what could I say? Dr. Barton had voiced my own wonderings—and concluded our short interview with the rather shattering comment that “women were kittle cattle and he would never understand ’em! But that that pretty Greek cousin of mine ought to have been the one who was bearing the child; she seemed far more interested in it than its mother!”

A long time later on I asked Chloris what she felt about Gilda's odd attitude towards her coming child, and she told

me that she found it hard to understand, but put it down to a mixture of shyness (bless her kindly heart! Gilda shy?) and fears of the sort that the doctor had mentioned. She said that she had tried, on several occasions, to talk about it and try if, speaking as a doctor's daughter, she might perhaps be able to soothe at least some of the fears; but that Gilda had shut up like a clam and showed so plainly that she disliked talking about the child that Chloris had fallen silent, and decided that the only thing to do, if they were to remain friends, was to follow Gilda's lead, little as she sympathized with her attitude.

In fact, this attitude went far towards spoiling the genuine liking that Chloris had had at first for Gilda, and sowed in her certain seeds of doubts of the wisdom of my marriage that were later on to flower into real and definite distrust; but she went on in her usual charming way, visiting us when she could; though her individual visits to Gilda alone gradually grew fewer and fewer as (she said) her work became more and more absorbing, so that her spare time was definitely less than it had been at first.

This I had every reason to believe, as encouraged by her editor, Mrs. Bruce, who had accepted and published one or two of her short stories as well as articles in her weekly, *Eve's World*, Chloris had embarked on the ambitious project of her first novel; Aunt Mary reported, with a mixture of pride and amusement, that Chloris spent much of her time at home now hammering away on her typewriter in her own room. I do not think that Gilda, wrapped ever more and more in her own thoughts—and to judge from her face when she did not realize that she was being observed, these were gloomy ones indeed—realized that Chloris' personal visits to her for an hour or two of the "girl's gossip" that most women enjoy, had ceased.

Now Gilda's time was near, and since she was too vain to appear in public in her state of pregnancy—and certainly she was a huge size—she would only go out after dark, and then only in her car or mine. Many a time I would return

from the office to find her gone, and Maria would tell me that the *signora* had taken her car out for a drive. Gilda had always had her own car, and though she was a good driver enough, when I reproached her for not waiting until I could take her out, she would only laugh abruptly and say she was poor company these days, and better by herself! Which was only too true—and I found myself increasingly thankful that I had my little dressing-room to retire to; for somehow, these days the idea of sharing the same bed with Gilda was slowly but surely growing more and more distasteful! Which raised a formidable problem for me, for what on earth should I do if, when the child was born and Gilda once more her normal self, she expected me to take up again the passionate love-making that had once meant so much to her? The prospect worried me not a little, as men are not like women who can, if necessary, simulate passion well enough to convince the man with whom she sleeps that she reciprocates his fervour to the full. With a man, desire has to be there in full force, or he cannot even begin to make love; and if my old desire for Gilda's body did not return, when that body had regained its former svelte beauty, how on earth should I explain to her my failure as a lover, as failure I would certainly be?

But for the moment that question was postponed, and actually, I now saw little of Gilda. My father and I never went home for lunch, but lunched out at a pet restaurant of ours in Bury Street, and if Gilda went out in the evening she always left a note for me to say she had instructed Maria to serve me dinner, as she might be late or decide to dine with a friend; and since she had many friends, some of whom I did not even know, I could only shrug my shoulders and accept the situation. She spent hours and hours each day working in her studio, and some of the ceramics she was turning out were certainly beautiful and would, I knew, attract great notice in the exhibition she meant to hold when she was well again.

If only the enthusiasm she showed in her artistic work could have turned into equal enthusiasm for her coming child! But

as far as I could see, she never gave the child a thought and spent her time mostly in her studio, companioned only by the cat Satan, to whom I had now taken a definite dislike. I would have liked to get myself a dog; but remembering the scene with old Roy, and Gilda's flat declaration that she could never get on with dogs or horses, I knew it would be no use. So I threw myself heart and soul into my work at Bury Street, and was gratified to find myself growing more and more *persona grata* with our customers and with the international experts who frequently came to consult my father—until one night I had another very curious dream.

Gilda had been out that night in her car, and had supper with some friend or other; coming back, she had declared she was tired and gone off to bed early, and after watching a programme on T.V. that was a favourite of mine, I went to bed also. Luckily there was a second door into my dressing-room so that I did not have to enter via Gilda's room and risk waking her; and as I undressed I could hear her tossing and muttering to herself in her sleep, obviously as restless in sleep as she was in her waking moments. The cat Satan was prowling round the room, and as I lay down he came to the door of the dressing-room and, standing there for a moment, surveyed me with his lambent green eyes. He had grown into a huge brute, handsome enough with his thick black fur, and I remember thinking, as I stared at him, how easy it would have been, in an earlier day, to translate him into the dreaded familiar that was, it seemed, attached to all witches!

I don't know why, but the thought somehow stabbed me sharply, and rearing up on one elbow, I shied at Satan a book that lay beside my bed. Spitting fury, he leapt aside and disappeared into the shadows of the further room; and tired as I was, I cuddled my head into my pillow and was soon sound asleep.

Now some time later—some two hours it was, as I glanced at the luminous clock beside my bed—I woke up sharply and heard Gilda's voice talking. The door between our rooms

usually stood ajar, and I could hear her voice quite clearly. Yet I realize that though I thought I was awake, I must still have been in a curious sort of dream, for it seemed to me that while I was in my bed I was also "elsewhere and otherwise".

I was standing in some great hollow place—underground, I was sure, though it was dark and I could not see much; but there were scattered small lights here and there high up, like torches, on the walls, and some way off there was a round globe of green light, a livid, most horrible shade of green that made me think of putrescence rather than the green of lovely growing things. In the small lighted area round each of the torches I could see that they were set on iron sconces set in a rocky wall; so it was plain that it was in no place built with hands that I found myself, but in some vast cave, and round me I could feel the hushed susurrus of a crowd of people, all holding still as though spellbound before the globe of green fire. Somehow I knew that there was Someone seated within the circle of that globe, but who it was I could not see, and I have since had reason to be thankful that my eyes were held so that I could not—and as I stared I heard a voice speak, a voice hollow, distant, terrible!

"Daughter," it said, "your time is near. You hear me?"

And lo, I heard Gilda's voice, clear and distinct, though I knew she must be lying in her bed at home, as I was also—though how that could be, I could not guess. Her answer came slowly but without hesitation.

"I hear you, Master. Yes. Too well I know that my time is near!"

The strange voice came again, and it seemed to echo round the vast place in which I stood in the most uncanny way.

"You are prepared to fulfil your promise broken four centuries ago?"

Gilda's voice came, and now it was hard and clear.

"I am! Once I broke faith with you, my jealous Master, but not again."

The voice spoke again.

"You do well to promise to keep faith now, for since you

broke that faith the curse has fallen upon you, and follows you even now."

"I know," said Gilda's voice, and in it was the note of doom. "I know that only by fulfilling my ancient oath can I be made free of the curse and able to follow you. . . ."

"It is well you understand," said the voice. "Steel yourself, my daughter! And now, farewell until the time comes for the Meeting at which you make amends. . . ." Then suddenly the voice faded into a horrifying chittering as though the unseen multitude who listened had burst into triumphant laughter—and lo, I was lying in my bed, bathed in perspiration, with my heart thumping, and the horrible visitation had vanished!

As soon as my heart had steadied up, for it was beating like a trip-hammer, I crept out of bed and looked into Gilda's room. She always slept with her curtains drawn apart so that the moonlight could fall upon her, and she was sleeping quietly, with the cat Satan curled at her feet. He raised his head and sent me a malevolent glance; but she never stirred, so I went back to bed and, thank goodness, to sleep again, and this time without any dreams!

Needless to say, I said nothing to Gilda about the extraordinary experience I had had, as it might have upset her: and anyway, once in the broad light of day I was able to dismiss it as a mere nightmare, probably caused by something I'd eaten at dinner—which was a gross libel on Maria's cooking! But in point of fact, I had but little time to think about myself, for about lunchtime the monthly nurse, who was already installed in our house ready for eventualities, telephoned me at the office to say that "Madame's labour pains had started and she had sent for Dr. Barton"—and the rest of the day and night was another sort of nightmare!

Dr. Barton had to send for a specialist, the celebrated accoucheur Sir Horace Sitwell, as it appeared that Gilda was not relaxing as she should, and the birth seemed to be being held back. Sir Horace, who did not like confinements in private houses, was not pleased, and told Dr. Barton so, though

the latter, who was an old colleague of his, protested that he had done his very best, and so had the patient's husband, to persuade Mrs. Randolph into going into a Nursing Home to have her child. This was true; but Gilda had been adamant in refusing, and finally, after an anxious three or four hours, the child was born and the two doctors having whiskies and sodas together with me and my father in the drawing-room. Sir Horace then admitted that private house as it was, the room that had been set aside for Gilda's ordeal could not have been better equipped in the finest hospital in the land.

"It was the least I could do," said my father, "as my daughter-in-law refused even to consider going into hospital, to provide her with everything that you experts might need in her own home."

Sir Horace grunted as he swallowed the last of his whisky.

"A difficult woman, that's plain," he said. "Courageous—got a will of steel, for she had very little dope to keep the pain down, and she never made a sound. Main difficulty was getting her to relax, for until I gave her a strong injection so that she lost consciousness and let her muscles go loose, she was as rigid as a log—almost as though her body was fighting against having the baby! Even when she passed out she kept muttering, "No, no" at intervals—and when it was over she just turned over and seemed to go to sleep. Most women want to see their babies, when it's all over. But she never glanced at it . . . really, very odd. . . ."

5

The Notebook

GILDA made a poor recovery from the birth of our son, and the doctors were, I could see, rather puzzled at this as, after all, she was a young woman and well built and supple—though apparently “supple” was the last thing she was during the long process of Noel’s birth! For some reason, unless mechanically relaxed by the administration of drugs, she did not seem able to “loosen up” as she should have done, but stiffened up and remained rigid when the pains came. She “did nothing at any time to try and help herself or the baby,” as Dr. Barton said to me once over a drink one night, when it was all over and the child safely born. He said that before the actual labour began, he had tried to teach her how to make things as easy as possible for herself; but though she had listened obediently, when the moment came to make practical use of his instructions she had entirely failed to do this. He could only conclude that when the crux came, her fears had taken such command of her that she had forgotten all he had said and given in to them—and yet, he said meditatively, she didn’t give one the impression of a weak-minded woman! Quite the contrary. Well, well, as he had said before, women were kittle cattle, and he would never begin to understand them. . . .

Though Gilda was slow to recover from the shock and strain of her experience, the baby was normal enough, and

I was proud of him; a small sturdy creature with my blue eyes and a tuft of hair that already showed the golden glints of my family. Luckily the nurse we had found was a very nice conscientious girl, though I could see she was puzzled by Gilda's apparent lack of interest in her child; having found that Chloris was trained in nursing work, she became very friendly with her, and told her many things that Chloris subsequently told me.

It seemed that Gilda never actually *asked* for her baby! When, impelled by her own maternal instinct, the nurse, whose name was Grace Lloyd, would bring the child and lay it beside its mother on her bed, Gilda would glance down at it, move her arms to make room for it, but she never, as far as the nurse saw, cuddled it, talked or played with it as most women do. She would lie sometimes watching it, Grace Lloyd said, with the strangest expression on her face—an expression fixed, intent, sombre, almost grim at times—and though she accepted with a smile and a word of thanks the various presents, cuddly toys and so on that of course arrived as presents for the newly-born, she never troubled to play with them or tried to teach the child to do so. She pushed them on one side half-irritably, once her thanks had been expressed, in the same way as she pushed the child, when she thought she had had it long enough beside her, and would ring for Nurse Lloyd to take Noel back to his cradle, saying he was restless and she couldn't bear it any more. But the worst thing she did—and this I was really vexed about—was flatly to refuse to nurse her baby!

There was no question of her lacking milk, for she had plenty—but she definitely refused to allow the child to suckle! She hated being a cow, she said fiercely when, surprised and dismayed, I asked her why she refused what is surely a baby's right—its normal food, which doctors all acknowledged is better for a child than the finest artificial products. She continued to refuse, and insisted that her milk be drawn off and her breasts massaged until they regained their normal size and shape. She wasn't going about with long ugly hanging

breasts like a native woman, she declared; and it was all rot talking about a child being dependent on its mother to feed it! Modern children were O.K. on other forms of food—how did I think actresses and society hostesses would manage if they had to keep on rushing away from wherever they were in order to feed a baby every two or three hours?

She was adamant, and I think it was really this that turned Chloris finally against Gilda, though I had noticed a subtle change, as I have explained, taking place in their relationship during the past few months. At first Chloris had made endless allowances for what she thought was a woman frightened of childbirth; but as the weeks passed and Gilda's attitude towards her coming child not only did not change, but seemed to harden and grow worse, the tender side of Chloris' nature took fright and began to withdraw—for this was not a woman as Chloris knew women! Slowly but surely the maternal side that formed so large a part of my sweet Greek cousin's nature took more and more command so that she seemed, and in truth was, far more interested in the coming child than its mother—and when Noel was born that maternal sense took over completely! A long time later on, Chloris told me that she felt such a shock of surprise and horror when she heard from the nurse that Gilda was refusing to nurse her baby that it killed the last remnant of the liking she had at first felt for Gilda.

"I know," she added, "that that liking wasn't real, actually—I mean, it didn't go deep. It was a combination of fascination, for she had set herself out to attract both Mother and myself, and a desire to like and make a friend of the woman you had married, because I was fond of you and wanted to remain in your life. But when I began to realize what Gilda was really like. . . ."

Another thing that surprised and upset Chloris was that Gilda would not allow Noel's cot to be placed in her bedroom—she declared that she slept badly enough as it was, and to risk being awakened at any hour by a restless baby's squalling was more than she could bear (although Nurse Lloyd said

that actually Noel was a very quiet baby, and did very little squalling.)

So the spare room was given over to Noel and his nurse; and although now and again Gilda paid the nursery, as we called it now, a visit, I was sure that this was because she realized that the conventional picture of motherhood made it imperative for her to behave according to the picture rather than going because she had any desire to see or play with her child. Incidentally, soon after Gilda was up and about again she dismissed Grace Lloyd and got a young Italian nurse called Irina in her stead, who struck me as over-young and very much in awe of Gilda, though probably good enough at her job.

I suppose it must have been about two weeks after Noel's arrival that I found the notebook—and it happened in this way. Since nowadays the doctors don't encourage women to lie about and play the invalid for weeks after childbirth, as was done in Victorian days, Gilda had been urged to get up and move about as soon as was reasonably wise, and try to begin to lead a normal life again as soon as possible.

Though she was gathering strength again, she was still rather tired and often went to bed very soon after dinner; and one night I made a curious discovery. She had bidden me good night and disappeared—incidentally, with no hint or suggestion that she would like to see me later. By this time we had virtually ceased to live together as husband and wife, although the doctor had said that Gilda was now certainly sufficiently well to cope with the marital duties that are supposed to be an essential part of any successful married life. Indeed, he advised me to resume normal relations as soon as I could, as in his view the more normal a sex life Gilda led the better for her; it might serve, he thought, to straighten out much of what was plainly somewhat warped and awry in her psychological make-up.

Dr. Barton, being fond of me, was, I knew, genuinely anxious to do all he could to get Gilda "cured", as he termed it—in other words, to try to set right whatever was wrong

within her so that she reacted more normally to her child and the bearing of it; for it was more than plain to all of us that her reactions to Noel were very far from normal. Even when she was up and about again Dr. Barton still called occasionally to keep an eye on her and the baby, and I was thankful, for I was devoted to my little son, and secretly much worried and distressed that Noel's mother seemed to care so little about him.

I'm a sentimental sort of cuss, and think that children need constant love and attention, which Noel was far from getting at his mother's hands; and although he was still only in the cradle stage of existence, I couldn't help feeling that this lack must in the long run affect him—and in point of fact, the most modern outlook seems to coincide with mine! The whole thing weighed on my mind a good deal; so much so that I was relieved rather than anything else that Gilda's desire for me as a lover seemed to have faded out—for in fact, my early physical passion for her had also faded out, and had she made sexual demands on me I would have found it very difficult, if not impossible, to accede to these demands!

And as for giving her another child, much as I would have loved a little daughter to companion Noel as he grew older, nothing in the world would have persuaded me to give Gilda another baby, after seeing how oddly and unnaturally she comported herself with this one!

After watching her trail gracefully upstairs—for she could not move without that curious sinuous grace that had been one of the many physical things about her that had first attracted me—and disappear into her bedroom, I yawned, and wandering back into the drawing-room, turned on the T.V. set and watched for ten minutes or so. But the programme was a boring one, and after awhile I got up and walked across the landing into Gilda's studio, to have a look at the new models she had been working on for her show. The room was, as I have explained, the old chauffeur's room, built over the garage, and we had connected it with the house by knocking a door in the wall between the house and the

room. The alterations necessary to turn the room into a working studio had resulted in a good-sized apartment that was very practical for Gilda's work.

The atmosphere in the room was warm, as that day she had been baking a batch of new models in the small kiln that had been built against the wall where the old fireplace had once stood. The kiln door stood open still, and the hot air from within circulated round the room; but the oven was empty of its finished contents, which stood cooling in a group on the surface of a wooden table set under the window. On a large table in the middle of the room stood a heap of clay covered with a damp cloth to keep it moist, various "mounts", or wire shapes which she used to help her to mould the clay into the shape she wanted, a group of varied paint pots and a vase full of brushes, also a clay-coated litter of the different implements that she used in her work. Five new shapes had emerged from the kiln that day, and looking down on them, I realized afresh how gifted was this strange wife of mine.

There was a crouching squirrel, its tiny handlike paws held to its mouth as it nibbled the nut that it held, and a kitten playing with a mouse. This last was plainly based on the cat Satan, as the kitten was an inky black, and its green eyes, fixed on the helpless shape of the tiny mouse held fast below one remorseless paw, were exact, even to the triumphantly greedy glint in them! There was, to me, something definitely unpleasant about this particular shape, and I set it aside and studied the three others; a pair of owlets perched shoulder to shoulder in the ivyhung hollow of a tree, a robin redbreast feeding its gape-mouthed young, and the last, the largest of the group, a magnificent humming bird.

This shape stood almost a foot high, and was perched on the branch of some flowering tree or other; and it was really a fine piece of work. Brilliantly coloured in green and gold and rose, its wings widespread, its long black beak poised ready to plunge into the open mouth of a flower to find the nectar that was its food, it was so delicately designed and balanced that it seemed poised in the air, as in life, and one

almost had to look for the slender branch or twig on which it was actually placed. It was certainly one of the best pieces that my wife had ever done, and would create a sensation, I was sure, at the Exhibition she was planning for the spring.

I put it down and idly picked up one tool after another, trying to visualize what Gilda used each for. There was a delicately shaped wooden thing like a scalpel, still crusted with bits of hardened clay, another like a spatula, another like a crochet-hook—I put them down, and equally idly, opened the right-hand drawer of the table by which I stood.

It contained a jumble of pieces of paper, sketches, ideas for future work, diagrams and some odd photographs of specimens that had taken the photographer's eye at her last show—and in a far corner, a small cardboard box. Curious, I took this out and opened it, and stared—for it contained, beside other loose papers, several small sealed envelopes with names written on them; and in one corner there was a medium-sized black-covered notebook. Larger than a pocket-diary but smaller than an exercise book, with a pencil attached that slid into a small slot on one side.

I examined the envelopes one by one. Most of the names on them I did not know, but a few I did, I was astonished and somehow unpleasantly impressed to find among them three bearing the names of my father, Chloris and myself! I held one of the envelopes up to the light, but could not see what it contained other than a faint undetailed blur, and I hesitated, unwilling to open it. I knew my wife's temper, and unlikely as it was that these envelopes contained anything important to anybody besides herself, she hated to have her things "interfered with" as she would describe it; and of all things I had learned to dread and avoid a scene.

Now I took up the blackcovered notebook and, opening it found that it was a diary of sorts, dating back to some years before I met Gilda. It was written in Italian; but luckily Italian was now my second language and I had no difficulty in reading it, although the writing was small and cramped and the diary was not regularly kept day after day, as most

conscientious diarists keep their journals. Large gaps occurred in it from time to time. The diary began some months before her first marriage and I noticed that though the date of that was sedulously noted down, there was no rapturous description of dress, ceremony or the wedding night, as might have been expected from a young bride!

Instead, I read things like this.

"Today week I shall be married to G.Q." (I noted later that she always alluded to her first husband by these initials only, and there was nowhere any hint of her feeling any sort of love, passion or even vast interest in him!) "Lucky that I have succeeded in making him leave me his business if he dies. I shall sell it, of course, which will give me a good capital sum to start with at least. Money is what I need and what I am determined to have. Regarding what my father can leave me, at present I know that he had made a will in which I inherit the business and everything else he possesses; but I cannot absolutely count on this. As he is still a comparatively young man, he may marry again and even have a child or children, in which case, of course most of what he has to leave would go to them. This, of all things, I must and will prevent. But to be on the safe side, I think it is wise to marry G.Q. as this will give me standing as a married woman; and after a while, when I am free again, I can return to my father's house and deal with any danger to him from there."

I stared. "When I am free again"—what a truly remarkable phrase for a young woman about to be married to use! Already, it seemed, Gilda was visualizing shaking loose from her marriage and returning to her father's house—but she was still counting on retaining her possession of her husband's business when she did so! This was implicit in the last sentence—and yet in her first she implied that she had made her husband leave her his business *when he died*! I knew that Giacomo Quarenghi had been only twenty-eight or twenty-nine when he had married, and he had lived only about two years after that marriage. Could it be possible that he had suf-

ferred from some sort of mortal complaint such as consumption, which is still comparatively common in Italy, and that she had married him knowing this, and counting on it to "free her", as she coldbloodedly put it?

Having seen one or two photographs amongst the many that decorated Antonio Pirelli's home in Milan, of a stoutly-built, floridly handsome young man, I knew what G.Q. looked like; and anything less like a consumptive subject could not be imagined!

Completely puzzled, I went on reading, and felt more and more puzzled as I read. Many of the scattered notes were too cryptic for me to make anything out of them; but as the months passed by after the marriage I could not help noticing that the letters G.Q. cropped up time and time again, often with comments such as these attached to them.

"G.Q. moody and difficult today—tried formula X again." "Think X not strong enough, will try Z, but must go cautiously." "G.Q. responding, though slowly—how he hangs on to life!" "G.Q. looking more and more haggard—Z plainly what I need."

I turned over another page or two and paused, seeing a name I recognized—Selina Bianchi. It was the name of a woman I remembered quite distinctly—a friend of Antonio Pirelli's who had joined us at dinner once or twice in Milan. She had been a plump, jolly, rather handsome woman in her forties, one would say; the widow of a jeweller, I remembered Antonio had told us, and on each occasion she had worn very beautiful pieces of jewellery. Once a necklet, earrings and bracelet of fine gold set with emeralds and diamonds, old Italian work; and another time she had worn a magnificent cameo set of earrings, necklet and large round brooch. She was wise enough to wear only plain black satin to set off the beauty of these ornaments, and I wondered why ever her name appeared in this notebook of Gilda's. I read the scribbled line or two that followed the last mention of the name. It read thus. "Father seeing too much of Selina—dangerous! Tried the same way as with G.Q. but too slow. Then tried the

water experiment, with amazing success. So that danger is averted at last. . . ."

I frowned, puzzled. Another cryptic comment—what on earth did it mean? I leafed idly through more and more scribbled pages and halted suddenly, seeing the letters G.Q. again.

"G.Q. died yesterday, to my great relief. Doctor's verdict, consumption, and certainly G.Q.'s looks, this past few months, give colour to that idea. I put it into doctor's head—it was easy, as he reacts to magnetism almost as strongly as that silly young Englishman, Keith Randolph, whom I met the other day at my father's. Though I think that this English contact may well be worth following up. . . ." Attached to the scribbled paragraph was a little snapshot marked "G.Q." on the back—but it was of a man so changed from the florid, rather flamboyant creature of the old photographs I had seen that without the initials on it I should never have recognized him!

He had grown haggard and hollow-cheeked, his hair was plainly thinner and his hands clawlike—what on earth could have happened to a strapping, healthy young man in his twenties to make him look like that? Certainly many Italians do die of consumption; but from the way in which Gilda had written, it looked as though this was not the cause of death, although she herself "put it into the doctor's head". Which by implication looked as though she had known the cause of the man's death, but had chosen to label that death by another name—and there was something definitely ugly about this implication! I frowned. I seemed to be learning things about my strange wife that I would have been better not to know!

I turned over more leaves and read fragmentary comments on my father and myself interspersed with descriptions of "meetings", evidently of some group or other, though there were no details of what took place at these; fragments of conversation, advice received from friends—again, as a rule so cryptic that they meant nothing to me—and at last I noted

down the date on which I had asked Gilda to marry me. The accompanying note simply read thus.

"The Englishman has proposed, as I meant him to do, and now my future is really assured. His father is rich, and so Keith will be when he inherits his father's business, and this he should do fairly soon, if I know my work—and I think I do!"

Now what on earth could that mean, with its suggestion that my father, a hale and hearty man of under sixty, was due to die soon? All that ailed him was this occasional heart-trouble which the specialist had discounted—and what did she mean by "if I know my work"?

With a nasty sense of foreboding nagging at me, I glanced through the rest of the book, to find other passages that stunned and bewildered me. Our marriage was touched on casually, though in no great detail, and later came one or two comments concerning myself, which were complimentary concerning my prowess as a lover, also on my "manageability" in other respects—one or two acid comments on Chloris and Aunt Mary, and towards the end of the book two or three pages filled with virulent abuse of the coming baby! It was plain that the thing that for normal women fills them with joy and wonderment and hope as they plan and dream of the coming child, had merely served to irritate Gilda to a pitch of near madness—for I had rarely read such fiercely savage language, well as I now knew Italian!

Here and there were puzzling allusions to "the Master". "He who has Supreme Command"—and in one place there was something of a curse, but here the writing was smudged and unclear, so I could not be sure. But as I read I remembered one of the odd dreams I had had in which I seemed to hear a voice which spoke of a curse . . . and as at last I came to the end of the book and put it back in its place in the box, I felt a dark shadow lowering over me. Here was something I could not understand—and something that aroused a sense of real and desperate fear somewhere deep down in my soul. In the black book I had read complete confirmation of

what I had now long suspected—which was that the woman I had married was entirely wanting in any capacity for love!

She wanted out of life power, wealth, position, and she was plainly ready and willing to do anything to gain these things—anything, even if that “anything” included methods abhorred by ordinary decent folk.

Precisely what she had been about concerning her first husband's death I still did not know—but that she had been concerned in it, and in some dark and sinister way, of that I felt sure. But how find out the truth of these dire suspicions that were fastening on me? On a sudden resolve I put back the notebook in its place, picked up three of the tiny envelopes, those with our names on them, and took them along with me to the bathroom. Here I filled the washbasin with hot water, and holding first one envelope and then the other over the steam, saw the gummed flap of the envelopes loosen and at last open; then, placing the now open envelopes on a plate I had brought with me, I took them along to my study and set them on my desk under the concentrated light that I used for my work.

Drawing up a chair, I took the first envelope—it was the one that had my father's name written on it—and working as carefully as I could, for of course the envelopes would have to be regummed and put back in the box from which I had taken them, I spilt the contents of it on to the flat top of my desk and gasped with surprise. For lo, all it contained was a cluster of nail parings! And what in the world should Gilda, my wife, be doing with a bunch of nail parings carefully sealed in an envelope? The second envelope that had Chloris' name on it was empty; so now I opened the third envelope, which bore my name, and spilled out its contents on my desk, to find the same things inside it as I had found inside my father's! Nail parings—but with this lot there was a little bunch of hair, either cut from a man's head or else collected carefully from his brush and comb after he had fixed his hair for the morning! My hair, it was obvious from its red gold colour, common in my family. Completely confounded, I sat

back staring at the two tiny heaps of mystery before me, trying to fathom what on earth they might mean?

Obviously I could never ask Gilda, as this would mean confessing to having poked and pried into her private affairs, and I was by this time, frankly, too much afraid of her tongue and her temper (also, I realize now, but didn't realize it then—of something in her that was grimly unlike any other woman I had ever known!) to risk letting her know.

My first instinct—and I know now that it was the right one—was to bundle all these horrible little envelopes together and burn them; but this I dared not do, as I had no idea how often she went to the drawer. Fairly often, I thought, because of keeping the diary more or less up to date, and then she would miss the envelopes. Plainly these scraps from the human body had been collected by Gilda herself, when she chose to exercise her talent for manicure and hair-dressing; but for what purpose only she could tell—and what she might do or say if she found anything missing from her private drawer, I did not like to think!

With the utmost care I gummed down the envelopes again, having replaced their contents within each, and putting them back again in the box, closed the drawer and the door of the workroom and went slowly upstairs to my bed. But it will be imagined that it was a very long time before I succeeded in getting to sleep!

6

Rena Takes a Hand

ON most days my father and I had lunch together in a delightful restaurant in Bury Street, nicknamed "Tell's" after its owner, Andrea Tellino; and towards the end of lunch it occurred to me to ask my father if he remembered the handsome widow Signora Bianchi, whom we had met several times with old Antonio Pirelli. My father said at once that he certainly did, and went on to say that he understood Pirelli had intended marrying this lady, whom he had known for many years, when Gilda was married again and installed in her own home.

Antonio would not, my father said, marry until that happened. He had promised this to Gilda, who had told him she could never endure to see another woman in her place; but alas, the Fates had settled that he was not to marry after all! I looked at him in surprise over my coffee.

"Why not?" I asked.

"She died," said my father, and I gaped as I looked at him. I remember that the *signora* had been at the special dinner given by Pirelli three nights before our wedding; and certainly she had been both vivacious and attractive, ablaze with yet another set of jewels, looking considerably younger than her forty-odd years, and very handsome in the black satin she always favoured. One would certainly never have thought that before very long she would have departed the life that she was at the moment palpably enjoying!

"Died?" I said. "Dear me, how remarkable! She always looked as healthy and strong as a horse—though that isn't very complimentary to a woman! What on earth happened?"

"It was an accident—and it happened only a few weeks after you and Gilda were married," said my father. "Very sad—and I was sincerely sorry for Antonio, as I believe he was really attached to the Signora. Her death came as a severe shock to him—didn't Gilda ever tell you about it?" I shook my head, and he went on.

"Signora Bianchi had a grown-up family by her first husband, the jeweller who left her those fine pieces of jewellery she used to wear; and it seems she was going out on a picnic somewhere, with a married daughter and her husband and children. The husband had a motorboat of his own on a nearby lake, and before having their picnic lunch, which they'd brought with them in the car, they decided to go for a trip on the lake. Somehow on the way back, one of the children leant over the rail of the boat and fell in, and the *signora*, who was sitting next to him, reached out to grab him, and fell in too! And though they caught the child easily and hauled him back on board, for some reason they couldn't pull the woman aboard. Her dress got twisted round the rudder or something, and held her down in the water—and though they made their way back to the landing stage as fast as possible, she was dead when they arrived. A very sad business."

I was silent—for I remembered the words I had read only the previous night in Gilda's notebook; the words that had accompanied the name of the woman she had had lined up, so to speak, as her successor!

"I tried the water experiment and it came off—I was delighted. . . ."

It could, of course, be nothing but chance that water should have been mentioned there, and Signora Bianchi had died by water; and yet somehow, at the back of my mind moved an uneasy feeling that it might *not* be chance. Gilda had wished to get rid of her husband so that she could enjoy in freedom her status of married woman and the money she would gain

through the sale of her husband's business; and that husband had somehow died within two years of his marriage to her; which had suited her convenience perfectly, mean and shabby as it was of me, I knew, to think of her in this way! After G.Q.'s death she had returned to her father, whom it was plain she could "manage" as she had managed G.Q. and—as I realized now—she was managing me, and lived on as Gilda Pirelli, until she captured a fresh and promising bridegroom—me! A young man, well-to-do, heir to a fine business, passionately in love with her—all, one would have said that any normal right-minded woman would want. And yet, from her own admission in the black notebook, she had not been satisfied! Greedy, as now I unhappily knew she was, for more and more money, since money spelt the power for which she craved, she was not content with the handsome settlement I had made upon her plus the generous dress-allowance, as well, that I paid each month into her bank. Still brooding on the possibility that her father, left lonely, might marry again and so develop fresh interests and fresh responsibilities that might divert his money away from her, she had plotted and schemed to prevent the marriage—nay, to my by that time thoroughly terrified mind, she had possibly done even worse than plot and scheme? Either she possessed sinister powers in which up to date I had never believed, or else in some uncanny way circumstance or fortune, call it what you will, had played into her hands! The *signora* was dead . . . and is it any wonder that now I wondered how long it might be before old Antonio Pirelli also met death in some strange and mysterious way? His death would mean that Gilda inherited a fine and paying business as well as a capital sum that would amount to a good deal. Antonio had been a saving man, and I knew had left Gilda heiress to all he possessed. . . .

I was truly thankful then for a rush of work that kept me so busy that I literally had no time to spend on brooding, tumbling into bed at night so tired that I fell asleep at once; but when things slackened up again, needless to say, my anxious mind picked up the gruesome wonder once again,

and I felt myself speculating gloomily on what manner of woman was it, in truth, I had married?

The offices of *Eve's World*, the weekly paper for women on which Chloris had a job, were situated not too far from Bury Street and sometimes Chloris and I would meet for a drink and a chat after we had finished our day's work—and on impulse I rang up Chloris one afternoon and suggested that we met. I did not realize it, nor did Chloris, but it is a fact that ever so slowly we were both drawing closer to each other, and did not want to meet at our respective homes, where on the one hand there would be Aunt Mary, and on the other, very likely, Gilda; and when I saw Chloris standing in the entrance of the particular pub we both preferred, a pleasant little place called "The White Pheasant", much favoured by Fleet Street men and women, I felt a sudden lifting of my heart that I suppose ought to have warned me how things were beginning to go with me. Though it never did—I suppose because I was so absorbed in my personal anxieties that I had neither time nor attention to spare for other things. But as she smiled at me across the clustered heads around the bar, and came across the room to the little sidetable where I was waiting for her, I felt as though a cloud had lifted from my spirits, the sun had come out, and life was once more worth living!

With a nod to the barman, who by this time knew us both well by sight, she settled down beside me and smiled into my eyes.

It was still warm weather, only September, and she wore a pretty navy blue and white figured frock with a loose blue coat over it and a tilted hat to match. I was glad that she had not joined the trend of hatlessness that was the rage at the moment, as somehow I think a woman without a hat looks awfully casual, though I don't mind it in the country or at the sea.

"Sherry as usual?" I asked, and Chloris nodded. She never drank spirits and disliked cocktails, in which she showed her wisdom.

"Sherry please—and oh Keith, I'm so glad you asked me today! I've got to celebrate—Mrs. Bruce has raised my salary, she's so pleased with me; and I'm to have a column of my own!"

I collected our drinks—her sherry and my beer—and offered her a cigarette as I congratulated her. I was really pleased, too. She had only been with the paper about six months, and I knew that she must have done well to have earned a raise. Florence Bruce was a stickler for style, and certainly would never have given this unless Chloris had deserved it; and the extra money would please Chloris. Though Aunt Mary was a generous soul, her stepdaughter was anxious to be as independent as possible, and this would certainly be a great help.

We spent quite a time discussing her affairs and then Chloris suddenly changed the subject. Touching my arm, she asked me if I felt all right? And when I said "yes, quite" she frowned faintly and told me that I didn't look all right, anyway! I looked worried and strained—had I been working too hard, or sleeping badly, or what? I laughed and repeated my assurance that I was perfectly O.K.—and then, how I don't know, I found myself asking Chloris a question I think now I should not have asked her! But I think the truth was I was so bursting to talk to *somebody* that I simply couldn't bottle it up any longer, and it had to come out.

Did she know anything—any good reason—for anybody keeping bits of hair and nail-parings? Chloris stared at me in bewilderment, and I went on to explain that I didn't mean kept just casually, but carefully, in separate envelopes, each marked with the name of the person to whom the parings and the hair had belonged.

Still staring at me, now she nodded, and spoke after a moment.

"Yes, Keith; I *do* know a reason why these bits should be kept—but it isn't a nice reason, and I wouldn't have thought that in this modern world anybody would ever have asked me such a question."

I stared at her in my turn.

"Why ever not?" I asked. Chloris frowned, and there was a faint pause before her reply.

"Because the answer belongs to a bygone world! A world that believed in things like witches and black magic and that sort of thing."

"I don't care where it belongs, I want it!" I said doggedly, and after a glance at me Chloris replied bluntly.

"Because to keep stuff like that sounds like witch-stuff! People used to believe that if you wanted to put a curse on anybody, you could do it from a distance if you could get hold of bits of hair and nail-parings and use those to focus the curse on—because anything that has belonged to a person is still *connected* with that person, even if they are separated! Like a sort of psychic umbilical cord, if you know what I mean. And if you couldn't get hair or anything like that, you could use a piece of shirt or any linen that had been worn by the person you wanted to curse—worn, and *not* washed. There is lots of evidence that this was freely believed in, in the Middle Ages—there are endless confessions admitting it."

I stared at Chloris, astonished.

"Where in the world did you pick up any knowledge of witchcraft?" I demanded and Chloris laughed.

"Oh I know plenty about it—in theory," she said. "You forget that Rena is a Thessalian, and traditionally all Thessalian women are witches. I've been fed with stories of magic and witchcraft and all that by Rena since I was a mere baby, and I've always taken it in my stride—much as ordinary children take Grimm's Fairy Tales or Hans Andersen! It never did me any harm that I can see—and I don't believe that Grimm & Co. ever did any harm to any child, gory as some of the stories are! I don't believe that children get any harm from reading about heads being chopped off by the lid of a trunk or stepmothers being rolled downhill in a barrel full of nails—to them it's just an exciting story, and that's all. Though naturally as I grew up I decided that I was a modern

young woman, and for all Rena believed in magic and curses and witches and all the rest, these belonged to an ignorant and superstitious past and were out of place in the world of today. . . ." She paused a moment and then went on. "Then when I was at school in England I read up a certain amount of stuff about the old witchcraft days there, because I wanted to compare it with Rena's stories and see how the English beliefs differed from her Greek. And I was surprised, you know, to find that they differed very little!"

I was silent, and after a moment she put the direct question that I had been fearing she might ask.

Why in the world had I asked her such a question? I was hard put to it to answer, for with my blessed girl—yes, in my secret heart I'm afraid I had already started to call her that—looking straight into my face with her blue eyes, so utterly honest that she was never in her life to be a good liar, my instinct was to be as honest as she was, and tell her the truth. But how could I? I could not, clinging still as I was to a sort of blind loyalty to my wife, or was it that I feared to tell the truth lest Chloris, who now proved to be much more knowledgeable about witches and witchcraft than I had ever dreamed, confirm the inner fears that were beginning to ride me?

With as good an appearance of casualness as I could muster, I laughed the point off, saying that I'd come across the suggestion in an article I had read somewhere on the prevalence of ancient beliefs—and the conversation passed on to other things; although I suspected then, and I know now, that Chloris was not deceived by my story.

But with the wisdom of a woman, she did not press the subject further, seeing that for some reason or other I had decided against telling her the truth about the origin of my strange question—for strange it was, coming from me, and cost her many an hour's anxiety as time went on. Yet it was Rena who solved the problem for her—and that within a few days.

One of the things that Chloris had come to ask me was to

invite Gilda and me to come to dinner with her and Aunt Mary. They were inviting my father too, and one or two other close friends. They were looking forward to giving us a real Greek dinner, now that Rena, Queen of Greek cooks, had returned; and I had, of course, accepted with great pleasure; but I had to remind Chloris of Gilda's dislike of salt. Could she teach Rena how to make sauces without salt for Gilda—and to leave the salt out of a portion of whatever main dish she would be preparing? Chloris nodded. She had taught Louise, the French woman who for the months that Rena had spent in Greece, had taken her place, to make a certain percentage of dishes, sauces etc., without salt, although Louise had pooh-poohed the idea at first and declared that no good cook could possibly cook without salt; but she had given in at last, with a Gallic shrug of contempt, and Gilda had been able to enjoy in comfort the meals she took at Aunt Mary's flat. Not that she went there very often—only often enough to avoid giving the impression that she was not anxious to go.

Chloris had suggested that when we came to dinner, we should bring Noel in his Moses basket, which we could easily carry between us. Aunt Mary adored babies, and always complained that there were too many stairs in our house for her to climb up to the second floor, on which Noel's and his nurse's rooms were situated; but I hastily quashed this idea, knowing what Gilda's reply would be, as it had been before, when taking Noel out with us had been suggested.

"Good heavens, no! Have the women cooing and purring over the baby instead of trying to make intelligent conversation? And having to bother about feeding and perhaps changing him, in the middle of a social evening when one was expecting to enjoy oneself? He'd far better stay with Irina, his nurse—after all, what are we paying her for?"

So one evening a week later we set out for Aunt Mary's flat, and found there awaiting us my father and two or three pleasant friends of Aunt Mary's, plus a young man. A brother or a cousin of one of the said friends, who was plainly in-

fatuated with Chloris, who was looking quite lovely in a sea-green gown with her Roman pearls; the presence of the young man, I regret to say, annoyed me so much that it quite spoilt my evening. And hard as I tried to tell myself that I was being a churlish fool and had no earthly business to be jealous of a fellow who was plainly as civilized as I was, probably as well off, and plainly free to fall in love as and when he would, it did no good. I remained secretly resentful and ill-tempered the whole evening, although for convention's sake I did my best to maintain a façade of ordinary good cheer.

The pre-dinner drinks were already waiting on the little coffee-table before Aunt Mary's sofa, and as we sipped our excellent cocktails, mixed by Chloris, who had learned the art from her father, and chatted amongst ourselves, I gathered that the young man, whose name was Theo Neale, worked on *Eve's World* with Chloris as their star photographer—which fact, as you may imagine, did nothing to commend him to my favour. It brought him altogether too close to Chloris! He was, I gathered, trying hard to persuade her to pose for him in advertising such things as cigarettes, gloves, perfumes and so on, saying what was nothing but the sheerest truth, that she would make a far more attractive picture than most of the girls who did the posing up to date.

I had joined them, driven by a sort of instinctive impulse, almost the moment we had entered the room, and I had not missed the oblique glance that Gilda had sent me as, the moment I had settled her on the sofa beside my father and put a cocktail in her hand, I had slid away and gone towards where Chloris and her companion were standing.

Now I had not seen Rena that evening, as she was busy in the kitchen preparing the dinner and Chloris or her attendant, young Neale, had let the guests in; so that the climax of the evening came as a great shock to me, as to everybody else! We had all had our drinks and were chatting cheerfully together when the door opened, and Rena, looking smart in a new brown poplin frock with a handsome embroidered apron over it of Greek handiwork—one of several that she

had just brought back from Greece—appeared in the doorway.

She surveyed the group of guests with a shrewd eye in the moment before she spoke the magic words "Dinner is ready, Kyria"—and then suddenly I saw her eyes light upon Gilda, sitting talking to Aunt Mary on the sofa. That evening my wife had chosen to wear the bizarre but effective sheath gown that she had made out of furniture brocade in golds, greens and reds, and her red hair tonight she had arranged so that it stood out in a sort of ruddy halo about her thin face with its amazing green eyes; she was laughing and talking, and I doubt whether she had even glanced up to look at Rena.

But Rena had seen her, and I saw her eyes widen, and her mouth too, in an expression of utter horror—and without a word she slid to the floor in a dead faint!

Needless to say we were all in a tizzy to see Rena flat on the floor! Chloris set down her drink and rushed to Rena's side while Neale and I followed suit, and together we lifted the woman, meaning to lay her on the sofa—but even as we did so she regained her consciousness, though she was still plainly dazed, and held on tightly to my arm as we steadied her. My father, who had rushed for the brandy the moment he saw Rena collapse, brought a glass and held it to her lips while she drank, shuddering as the strong spirit stung her tongue and throat. Gilda and the rest were staring, astonished, as she stood, still shaky but rapidly regaining her self-control, and muttering her apologies, turned to leave the room; but Aunt Mary intervened. Leaning on her stick, she came towards Rena, and her kind face was wrinkled with great concern.

"My dear Rena, whatever happened? Did you feel ill?" Rena shook her head and made some reply in Greek of which I only understood a few words, and Aunt Mary frowned, distressed and puzzled.

"If you're feeling really ill, Rena, you must go to bed at once," she said. "I'm sure, now the dinner is ready, we can manage somehow, Chloris and I."

"And the rest of us!" put in one of the younger women eagerly. "We'll all help, won't we?" There was a consenting murmur from the other women, but Rena shook her head. There was no need for the Kyrie to trouble themselves! She was quite all right now. She could not understand what had happened to her to make her faint, but she was perfectly well now and only anxious to get on with her work. And the dinner was waiting, so would the Kyrie enter and begin to eat it?

She was plainly determined not to be regarded as an invalid, and after one or two anxious protests on the part of Aunt Mary, we all entered the dining-room and the meal proceeded in the normal way. It was, as always, an excellent meal and I enjoyed it, although I found myself speculating curiously as to the reason for Rena's curiously sudden and complete collapse. It was just after she had caught sight of Gilda, whom she had never met before—you will remember the reason for that. Rena had had to rush back to Greece over some family trouble soon after Aunt Mary and Chloris had come to live in London, and had stayed there so much longer than she had intended that it was only recently, after the birth of Noel, that she had had a chance of meeting my wife. But why on earth should this, her first sight of Gilda, affect her so immediately and so strongly? While I ate my dinner I found myself puzzling more and more over this point. I wondered, as Chloris flitted in and out of the room helping to change plates, bring in dishes and so on—anything to help the Greek woman of whom they were so fond—whether Chloris could find out something of the reason?

There would be no chance as yet, of course, while the bustle and excitement of serving dinner was in progress; but afterwards I was certain that Chloris would be as keen as I was to try and find out the reason for her servitor's sudden collapse. I told myself that the very next chance I got I would ask Chloris what Rena had said, and had to leave it at that.

After dinner, two of the women suggested to Chloris that

they helped her wash up the things and put them away, thus enabling Rena to go to bed, and she thanked them and vanished into the kitchen; only to appear looking disappointed. It appeared that Rena would not hear of such a thing, though she had said that she thanked the Kyrie very much for their kind thought.

So there was nothing to be done, and we settled down to spend the rest of the evening amusing ourselves. Which meant that Aunt Mary and three of her contemporaries, including my father, went into the corner of the room and settled down to cards while the rest of us watched television—fortunately that night there happened to be a programme on that we all liked watching, for which I was glad. For still puzzled as I was about Rena's collapse, I would have found it difficult to spend the rest of the evening making artificial conversation, as I had done at dinner.

The party broke up early; everybody, I think, feeling that it would be kind to leave betimes, since plainly both Chloris and Aunt Mary were still anxious about Rena, and one of them kept on visiting the kitchen to see how things were going on. As along with young Neale I was picking my hat and coat up in the hall, I saw that the kitchen door was ajar and that Rena was standing there watching the guests depart—and deliberately I hung back while the others departed one by one.

Gilda was the last of the women to emerge from Chloris' bedroom, which was always used as a ladies' cloakroom when they gave parties, and she came into the hall smiling and chatting to Aunt Mary as she thanked her for the evening's hospitality. I stepped forward reluctantly—now Gilda had come I had to leave, of course—and as I did so, Chloris joined us from the drawing-room where she had been bidding good-bye to my father, who was leaving with us.

My father moved towards the front door, Gilda and Aunt Mary with him, all talking together, and stood talking for a moment waiting, I knew, for me, as I was driving the car. But before I could move, Chloris, who had halted by me,

turned as a quick step came behind her—it was Rena, slipped out of the kitchen. She was wearing a deeply-concerned expression on her lined face, and as she laid her hand on her young mistresses' arm I could see that it was tense with anxiety. She spoke in an urgent whisper in Greek.

“Κυρά σου, πρόσεχε. Αυτή η γυναίκα μάγιοόα!”*

* “Kyria, Kyria, be careful of that woman! I tell you she is a witch!”

7

Chloris Talks to Me

Now I must make it plain that although I don't speak Greek, at the same time, having something of a flair for languages and having visited Greece several times, I had a certain superficial knowledge of the language. Enough to know, at least, that Rena was delivering a warning of some sort; and since her gaze had been fixed on Gilda's red head as she stood in the doorway with her back to us, it was plain that the subject of her warning was, in fact, Gilda.

Actually, had she spoken Choctaw, her meaning would have been plain, simply from the urgent expression on her face, the pressure of her hand on Chloris' arm—but what did she mean by the last word in particular?

The moment she had spoken my father called me to hurry up, and Rena hastily withdrew—but all the way home I was puzzling over that word, and determined to find out what it meant. I knew that my father had a Greek dictionary—he had, in fact, one of most languages, as the world of antique specialists is an international one, and fine linguist as he was, he often needed a dictionary to help him answer some of the letters he received from all sorts of odd corners of the world.

I had retained the sound of the word pretty clearly in my mind, trusting to this, ran a word to earth in the dictionary that to me seemed to answer to the sound that was in my memory—and the translation of the word was "witch"! I

was thunderstruck—and yet I know that in some queer way I was not altogether surprised. I wrote it down in the notebook I always carry about with me and, tucking it into my pocket, told myself that I must have a talk to Chloris as soon as possible. By this time so many disquieting and uneasy things were at war in my mind that I felt I couldn't bear it alone any longer, and simply *must* talk to somebody—but at that time I was diverted for several days at least by my father's having yet another and, it seemed, more serious heart-attack; and not only that. The baby Noel did not seem to be making the progress that he should. Instead of his little body filling out and growing plump and healthy, he was over-thin and oddly somnolent, spending overmuch time asleep and taking little or no interest in his food, though by this time he was weaned and put on to the usual soft baby foods, and should have begun to show at least some sort of an appetite for them.

During the past two months or so I had begun to hope that Gilda was developing a real interest in her child, as now Noel was put in his carrying-cot to sleep in her room while his young nurse, Irina, went out for a couple of hours for a walk in the fresh air. This had been decreed by Dr. Barton, who had taken notice of the girl's pallor, insisted on examining her, and discovered that she was thoroughly anaemic and run down. She needed, he said, to be out more in the fresh air—and when Gilda rather acidly pointed out that the girl took Noel out in his pram every morning, Dr. Barton retorted that that was not enough! The girl was on duty then. It was only right and fair that she should have two hours off duty every afternoon, and get out and about by herself; during which time, as Gilda, like most Latins, took a regular siesta from two o'clock until three or four, the child could be left with her in her room until the nurse's return from her afternoon outing.

Gilda protested that she did not sleep for two hours! Upon which the doctor retorted that in that case, she could have the baby in her bedroom while she slept; and if then she

wanted to go on with her work, what was wrong with moving the child in its cot with her into her workroom, and making him comfortable there?

There was plainly no gainsaying this, and so it was arranged. Irina, the little nurse, rapidly gained strength and colour from her outings in the fresh air; and if she slipped into a cinema when it was raining, who shall blame her? At least she was off duty and amusing herself, which is as important for the mental side of anyone as for the physical.

The baby did not seem to me to change very much. He remained oddly pale and limp, and had little energy—I never remember him kicking and gurgling as most babies do. But my father, I'm thankful to say, got over his latest heart-attack quite well; and as then he was obliged to run over to Paris to attend an important conference, I determined to seize my chance. When his house was empty but for the old house-keeper who had looked after us both for so many years, I would ask Chloris to meet me there for a drink and a talk.

It was obviously impossible to ask her to my house for this, because of Gilda; and as for going to her flat, there was dear garrulous Aunt Mary, and Rena—and much as I liked Rena, I would not put it past her to do her share of listening at doors. And as I was the husband of the woman whom she plainly distrusted, listening would certainly be the order of the day had I gone to the Ionides' flat!

Chloris at first tried to evade coming, suspecting (as she told me later) that I had heard and understood something at least of what Rena had said to her, which she was reluctant to tell me.

But I wasn't going to be put off; and when I finally bluntly said that I thought the welfare of both my father and the baby largely depended on our having a frank talk, she gave in, and arrived one nippy November day, straight from her office, with a briefcase that was obviously full tucked under one arm.

That day she had on an ivy-green woollen outfit trimmed with black fur, and a tiny glengarry-type cap of the same

fur perched on her charming head; and she looked, trite as the comparison is, as pretty as a picture. As she walked into my father's cosy study with its blazing fire—it was from him that I had learned to love a real fire rather than the artificial ones of glass, steel and so on so popular these days—I felt my heart leap into my throat, and my instinct was to go forward, take her bodily into my arms and kiss her till she was breathless!

I think it was at that moment that I realized that I was in love, truly and desperately in love, with my step-cousin; but needless to say, I pulled myself together and contenting myself with a warm shake of the hand, helped her off with her coat, gave her a cigarette, and poured out a sherry for her. Under her coat was a matching dress of green woollen material, which was cut with a high neckline to it, on which I congratulated her, for it was now very cold weather, and one needed all the comfortable woollies one could put on. Chloris smiled and plunged into a long and quite amusing story about her work in the office at *Eve's World*, and I listened politely for awhile while I sipped my own cocktail and munched salted nuts; but I was not going to be put off indefinitely. And at last I interrupted.

"Come off it, Chloris," I said firmly, "I'm glad you are getting on so well in your job, but you know as well as I do that that isn't what I asked you here to discuss. Come on—come clean! If I don't talk to *somebody* and try to clear things in my mind, I shall go crackers—and you are the only person to whom I can talk. You know that, don't you?"

There was a pause, and Chloris nodded. Setting down her glass, her clear blue eyes met mine frankly.

"Yes, I know it. And for my part—even though I'm sorry it hurts you—I want to talk about it too. There are a lot of things that have been worrying me for some time past. . . !"

"If," I said, and I'm afraid my voice sounded rather harsh. "If you are afraid it may hurt me because its Gilda we must discuss—forget it! It is Gilda, and as her husband I suppose I'm being a heel to discuss her at all. But with you, I *can't* be

anything but truthful! And the truth is that quite apart from the worrying sort of things you mean—and I've had more of those than you can guess—I've known for months and months past that my marriage to Gilda was a terrible mistake. I was mad about her, then, physically speaking, and she worked on that, as she wanted an English husband who had a good position and plenty of money. But she never cared a button for me personally, and that I know."

Chloris looked at me pityingly.

"I'm sorry," she began, but I rushed on.

"Don't be sorry—I don't deserve it! I was a bloody young fool blinded by passion, and I've earned all I'm getting, believe me! But what is worrying me more than anything else is that both my father and the baby seem in some odd way to be suffering—and yet I can't imagine now that Gilda can have anything to do with this? Although I've already begun to realize that that wife of mine does seem to have some odd powers or other that most women don't have. . . ."

Chloris looked at me directly.

"You heard what Rena said to me?" she said bluntly.

"Just before you left, I mean?"

"I did," I said, "and though I don't speak Greek, as you know, I know enough to know that she was warning you to be careful—and that she called Gilda. . . ."

"She called Gilda," said Chloris calmly, "a witch! And frankly, Keith, fantastic as it sounds, I believe that that is what she is!"

Yes, that was the word I had found in the dictionary. "Witch!"

There was a moment's stringent pause. The coals fell together in the deep fireplace with a faint crash as Chloris and I stared at each other. I poured out two fresh drinks, and pulling up a chair, sat down.

"Now we've got the truth!" I said grimly. "And a few months—even perhaps a few weeks ago—I'd have laughed at you and at the whole thing as impossible! But—not any more! Now I'm going to fill in the gaps I left in my talk

to you the other day—gaps which I left out of a sort of blind loyalty to Gilda—and in your turn you've got to tell me all you know! Not only what you know, but what you suspect—and what Rena has told you."

Sipping her drink quietly from time to time, Chloris listened as I told her of the tiny envelopes containing hair and nail parings, of the little black book, and some at least of what that contained. I even told her of my own two queer dreams—and in the end Chloris nodded her head gravely.

"Yes—it's as I feared," she said. "Oh, I know witches are regarded now as just bits of superstition and not real at all—but Keith, it isn't true! Witches *do* exist! You see, I'm Greek, and I've spent many years in Greece, where such things as witchcraft are still believed in. And I've feared for some time past that Gilda was a witch because of something I saw one day when I called at your house to return a book I'd borrowed."

Stubbing out her cigarette she went on.

"You know, Keith, witchcraft never really dies—it only changes its outer aspect, or goes underground for a time—but it doesn't die. It *can't*, you see? Magic is simply the knowledge of how to call into action certain little-known laws of nature, and all down the ages a few people have known how to do that, though it takes much patience, time and study. Some people use these powers well and wisely, for the benefit of humanity—and that is white magic. But others use them for their own greedy ends, to gain money or revenge, or power over others—and then it becomes black magic! But *in themselves* these powers are as neutral as, say, electricity; it's the way in which they are used that makes the magic of them black or white."

"I see," I said slowly. "But tell me when you first began to suspect Gilda?"

"I think," said Chloris reflectively, "that it was really Rena who got me thinking about it first? When she came back from Greece I had to show her how to cook certain dishes and sauces and so on without salt, because of Gilda, and she

was very puzzled at that. You see, Rena is a woman from Thessaly, and from the Dark Ages Thessaly has been regarded as the home of witches—though why, I've never known. Rena knows all about witchcraft, and she told me that no witch would ever eat salt or cross cold iron or running water. I told her that Gilda was forbidden to eat salt simply because it was bad for her anaemia, and that shut Rena up for a moment. Though, to be honest, Keith, I've never believed much in that story? My father was a doctor, and I'm dead sure that avoiding salt isn't a cure for anaemia—so I put it down to a crank of Gilda's and thought no more about it. Though it stuck in my mind as a rather uneasy sort of puzzle."

I told her about the odd death of Signora Bianchi, who might have married old Pirelli, and Chloris nodded again.

"According to the old books on witchcraft—and recently I've been reading up a lot about it—that could have been done by making a clay or putty or plasticine figure of the person concerned, saying certain words over it, and drowning it in a cup full of water," she said. "You didn't find any such figure, but that doesn't prove that there wasn't one! It would have had bits of hair or nail parings in it, of course—and that would be easy for Gilda to get, because I remember she used to do Signora Bianchi's hair and hands sometimes. Br-rh!" She shivered. "Isn't it awful to think of!"

"Making a sort of poppet out of clay would be child's play for Gilda," I said grimly, "she's made several, human figures—for fun, she always says, as she never makes one for show. But go on, Chloris! You turned Rena and her suspicions off for the moment. It wasn't until Rena saw Gilda *for the first time* that night we came to dinner here and Rena fainted, that she recognized her, or thought she did, as a witch!"

Chloris nodded.

"That's true," she said. "Red hair and green eyes—that's another mark of the witch, at least according to Rena. When I saw Rena in the kitchen after she had got over her faint, she told me at once that she was sure Gilda was a witch!"

"And it seems," I said grimly, "that Rena was right. . . ."

For a long time we sat looking at each other soberly, then Chloris laid her soft hand on the top of mine. I gripped her hand hard as I spoke, and my voice sounded harsh in my ears.

"Chloris—what *are* we going to do? If this utterly fantastic thing is true, and I'm married to a woman who has evil powers that have been known and dreaded all down the ages, the thought terrifies and sickens me! If I could I'd pack my bags and run—leave her tomorrow—the mere thought of having to live in the same house with her now makes me shiver. But, there's the child. . . ."

"Because of the child, you can't leave her," said Chloris levelly. "Maybe some time later on things will fall out so that you will be able to leave her—but you daren't do anything precipitate now, or she will guess that you either know or suspect what she is. And knowing what we do of what she may be able to do—of what we fear she has already done—we simply *can't* risk that! But I hope"—she paused a moment and flushed but went on courageously. "I do hope that you aren't sleeping with her?"

"Oh no—it's months and months now since all that stopped," I said hastily. "Since long before Noel was born we haven't lived together—physically, I mean—and thank goodness she doesn't seem to want it any more."

"That's a great relief to my mind," said Chloris. "You sleep in the little dressing-room, don't you?" I nodded and she went on.

"I'll bring you something made of iron that you can keep above the dressing-room door so that she can't cross the threshold, and that will help to protect you . . . and I'll get a cross for you to wear also."

"Will that really help?" I asked rather doubtfully. She nodded.

"Oh yes! No matter how smart cynics try to decry and belittle the Cross, its a Sign potent for power, and has been for thousands of years before Christianity took to using it as a symbol—but for the moment, more than that we can't do. For the moment, you'll have to stick it out, I'm afraid."

"I can see I must," I said unhappily. "Apart from anything else, I can't leave Noel with her—I don't believe she has a shred of real love for him, Chloris! But I have, and I simply couldn't leave him in her hands." Chloris looked at me soberly and nodded.

"You're right," she said. "I'm not clear yet—though I hope I will be in time—quite what her attitude towards him is, but it's certainly not the usual attitude of a mother towards her child. And somehow I'm feeling that those odd dreams of yours have some connection with a child—if not this child, then with another—and that somehow, for some reason, Gilda broke a vow a long time in the past, in an earlier life, a vow connected with a child, and incurred a curse because of this that is still resting on her."

I stared at her, astonished.

"My goodness, Chloris!" I said, "that's uncanny—it seems to fit what I remember of those gruesome dreams. But how do. . . ."

"I might as well admit it," said Chloris with a rather wry smile, "my mother was a wonderful natural medium, and I've inherited a good deal of her gift though I don't often talk about it." She drew a long breath. "And it was thanks to this gift of mine that I saw something at your house that day when I was returning a book that's worried me ever since!"

"Then go on and tell me about it," I said firmly.

She drew another long breath and began.

"You know, you'd been worried for some time past because the baby didn't seem to be picking up and growing plump and strong and full of life, as normal babies do."

"You're right," I interrupted. "And Dr. Barton's been rather worried, I know—or at least puzzled—but go on!" Chloris nodded and went on.

"Well, as I said, I had to go to your house to return a book I'd borrowed, and when I got there I found the front door not quite latched, so I walked in. It was after lunch, the time when Irina went out for her two hours off as Dr.

Barton had ordered—she must have left the door ajar without realizing it—and Gilda would be having her usual siesta; so I stepped in as quietly as possible so as not to awaken her. I left the book I'd borrowed on the hall-table; but as it happened, I wanted to go to the toilet, which is on the same floor as Gilda's bedroom, as you know. I went very quietly up the stairs and into the bathroom, and as I left I heard a faint whimper and paused to listen. Now, I was just outside Gilda's room, and it was a hot day—this was back in the summer, and her door was open to let as much draught through as possible, and I peered in. I could see where Gilda lay asleep in the bed, and beside the window was the baby's carry-cot where Irina must have put it when she went out. The blind was down, but the curtains weren't drawn so I could see quite plainly—and I stood and gaped! For believe it or not, I could see a long thin pale ribbon like a shadowy tentacle just unrolling itself from Gilda's body, from the region of the solar plexus—and reaching across the room, it fastened itself on the body of the baby!"

"My God!" I jerked out, "how horrible!" Chloris nodded.

"I knew instinctively what it was—it was what one might call a psychic pump, and it was drawing vitality from the baby's body to feed it to Gilda's! God knows how often this must have happened since Irina went off in the afternoon and left the child near its mother, where this devilish thing could easily get at it. Is it any wonder that Noel looks frail and listless and doesn't get fat and hearty like a normal baby?"

I stared at her. "But what," I exploded, "what on earth are we to do?"

"I had to break the thing off somehow," said Chloris, "so I made a miaow like a cat and knocked a book off a little table that I could just reach which was standing just inside the door—and then I tip-toed off down the stairs as softly and quickly as I could! Evidently Gilda was in a deep sleep, as she only began to wake when I reached the bottom of the stairs—I heard her say in a sleepy voice "Satan, is that you?"

So she plainly thought the noise I'd made was her cat, and I made my getaway all right."

"I never heard of such a thing!" I muttered and Chloris shook her head.

"The Ancients knew all about it," she said. "About how, I mean, older people could sustain their vitality by drawing on the bodies of the young—which is the real explanation of the Bible story of how King David, when he was ageing and growing weak, bade his people 'send for a young virgin to lie in his bosom!' Most people think that this meant sex, and would say 'nasty old man'—but it *doesn't*! He wanted a strong young body on which he could draw for fresh vitality, to give him renewed strength—and I'm glad to say that modern doctors now disapprove most strongly of grandparents sharing a bedroom with their grandchildren, as often happened in Victorian days. They realize that this 'pumping' can and does go on, though it can only be actually seen by clairvoyance, as I saw it—so I'm thankful they are all now against it. Now you know the worst, Keith—and I must go. Yes, I know it's a terrible thing we are up against! But at least, now we have been honest with each other and can stand together and face it—and I'm sure, defeat it in the end."

Note by Author

The above may well be doubted by my readers—but I assure you that I myself, on one memorable occasion, have seen the "psychic pump" at work. One thing I would like to stress, which is that, normally speaking, this is quite innocently done and means no harm. It is the instinctive reaching out of a body that lacks strength towards one that possesses it in plenty. It is only in cases like Gilda's that it is deliberately used—which makes it evil.

8

Gilda Goes Away

IT was only a few days after that momentous talk I had with Chloris that Gilda had a letter from her father in Milan that made her sit up and frown heavily.

We were at dinner together. Gilda did not get up for breakfast, but had hers in bed, and I always had lunch, with or without my father, at some restaurant near our place, as with the heavy traffic it would have been too much to try and get home for lunch. I was increasingly thankful, these days, for the fact that for two meals at least I need not meet Gilda; for since I discovered what she was I had found myself shrinking more and more from her.

Despite the incessant endeavours of my sophisticated modern self to belittle and diminish what Chloris and I had discussed, I simply could not dismiss what seemed, despite all modernity and scepticism, to stick out a mile; and that was, deride the idea as I might, that the woman I had married *did* possess some strange, uncanny and alarming powers that she was ready and willing to use for her own ends, in the most remorseless way!

I looked across the table at Gilda, sitting there with her red hair turned to a halo under the electric light, and found myself considering whether, in contrast to the saints who wore golden haloes, those who gave themselves to the devil were adorned with red haloes! I dismissed the picturesque but un-

comfortable idea, and asked what her father had written to make her look upset?

Gilda threw over the letter to me and said as I picked it up, "Damn it! This would happen now, just as I'm working to get things ready for my Show!"

The letter was written in an obviously shaky hand, and was brief, merely saying that he had had two or three attacks of fever lately, had now been put to bed and was in the doctor's hands; but that she was not to worry, as he was being well cared for and had everything he needed. Signora Moreno was most kindly looking after him, as Gilda knew he detested professional nurses, and as the *signora* had herself been a nurse in her youth, she knew well how to care for an invalid. The short letter ended with love to her, to myself, and above all to Noel, the little grandson whom Antonio had never yet seen. . . .

I handed the letter back to Gilda with the remark that anyway, her father seemed to be in good hands; and she scowled afresh.

"That Moreno—widow Moreno," she exploded. "*Dio mio*, another of them! She has been, like the Bianchi woman, running after my father for years past, and now Bianchi's dead she's seizing her chance!"

She brooded heavily for a moment, and then got up from the table.

"Keith, there is nothing for it. I shall have to go to Milan!"

"But why?" I protested. "Your father's letter doesn't suggest that he is in a very dire state—in fact he doesn't say what is wrong, except a fever, and that's pretty vague. There are so many sorts of fevers in Italy."

But Gilda set her lips in a way I had good reason to know.

"Nevertheless, I must go," she said, moving towards the door. "I'm sure I'm needed there—though it goes against the grain to leave London just now, when I'm preparing new models for my Show. Oh curse these women who can't stop chasing my father!"

Needless to say, she went off—that very day, after a hasty packing of a couple of suitcases with the help of Irina. She caught an afternoon plane to Italy, and I must confess to a feeling of lightness and relief as the door closed behind her, of which I suppose I ought to be ashamed.

In the exuberance of my spirits, I went up to the nursery and had a look at Noel, sleeping peacefully in his cot. I felt a fresh pang of anxiety as I noted his pallor. He was getting on for a year old now and surely, if all I had heard of normal children at that age was right, he ought to have been showing more energy, restlessness and interest in the strange new world about him. As far as I could see, he spent most of his time asleep, though apparently he ate his meals with appetite, and if bright things or things that shook or rattled were shown to him, he would show a momentary interest and reach out to touch them; but if he were put down to crawl about, he generally curled up and went to sleep, and he had shown no signs of trying to walk or talk, though I was told that at a year old many children tried to do both.

Dr. Barton talked a lot about him being a "late developer"; but somehow that didn't satisfy me, and as I stood gazing down on the sleeping form of my little son, I remembered with an inward shiver Chloris' grim story of the waving tentacle that had reached out from Gilda, his mother, and fastened on him! Since my talk to Chloris, on her advice I had joined a library that had a section devoted to books on Spiritualism, folklore, magic and so on, and had borrowed various books from it and read these secretly—needless to say, hiding them carefully from Gilda. Luckily I had to carry a brief-case to and from the office very often, and this had a lock; so I was able to hide the books in this. And all that I had read confirmed and explained what Chloris had told me, so that my uneasiness grew stronger each day, and I welcomed Gilda's departure with almost hysterical thankfulness. At least, for a time the "pumping process" by which, I gather, Gilda was drawing vitality from the tiny helpless body to feed her own—must cease, and the atmosphere of the

house would feel clean and clear as it never did when she was there.

Needless to say, I rang Chloris at once, and she consented to come round for a drink and chat, though it could not be for two or three days, she said, as she had been paid the compliment by Mrs. Bruce of being invited to accompany her over to Paris for three days to see and report on the dress shows there. So I had to possess my soul in patience until she returned, and was comforted through the days by seeing both my father, who had had two or three more attacks of heart-trouble lately, very much better and more like his old self; and to my delight and satisfaction, even within only three days the baby Noel seemed vastly improved all round! His young nurse, Irina, who adored him, reported to me that he was crawling about the nursery now quite vigorously, and trying to play with his cuddly toys and even burbling and bubbling with his soft mouth in the obvious endeavour to say something, even if it were quite unintelligible. Moreover, I could see, for I visited him every day, sometimes twice a day, that his little face now had more colour, his eyes were brighter, and now plainly took notice of the world round him; and as I hugged him and muttered a prayer of thanks to God—to which I added the second prayer, which I know was rather cruel, that old Pirelli might be ill enough to keep Gilda away for a very long time.

However, my waiting came to an end after four days, and Chloris came, as she had promised, when she had finished her work at the office, and as we saluted each other, I had to suppress another frantic desire to seize her in my arms and kiss her. Needless to say, I did nothing of the sort, but poured her out a sherry, as she poured out stories of her three days in Paris; which had been, as I was sure they would be, a riproaring success. One item of news she told me, certainly, I could have done without, and that was that that Neale fellow had persuaded her to pose for a colour photograph that was to appear on a forthcoming cover

of *Eve's World*; but since Chloris herself was as pleased as a child with a lollipop, I pretended to be equally pleased, and all was well.

She asked me if I had had reports from Milan, and I said I had only had one letter, to the effect that old Pirelli was worse than Gilda had expected, and she had called in another doctor, an old friend of hers. Also that she had sent Signora Moreno flying and instituted herself nurse instead, which did not surprise me at all—and Chloris listened and nodded. When was Gilda returning? She had not said, and I did not know—and as I spoke Chloris drew from under her arm a long thin thing that looked like a stair-rod wrapped in newspaper, and laid it carefully on the table. She also opened her handbag and drew out a little jeweller's box of white card-board.

She handed me the box. I opened it, and inside lay a fine silver chain, coiled round a little silver cross on which the figure of Our Saviour stood out in moulded relief. It was a beautiful little piece, and as I looked at her she said.

"This is for you to wear, Keith. Always. You can put it on now. As you don't sleep with Gilda any more, she is not likely to see it. It has been blessed by being dipped in holy water and left all through one night on the High Altar of a great church—and it is strong to guard and help. So whatever you do, don't take it off."

I looked at her curiously.

"Why are you afraid for me?" I asked.

"I'm not—at the moment," said Chloris bluntly. "Frankly, you're worth more to Gilda, whose God, we both know, is money and the power it brings, alive than dead, since you're bringing in the cash that runs this place and buys her mink coats, and a new car when she wants it, and all the rest! But I don't trust her—and I'd feel happier and know you were safer if you wore it. Promise me you will?"

Needless to say, I promised, and undoing my collar and tie, I slipped the chain round my neck and felt a little thrill of satisfaction as the silver cross slipped into its proper place

on my chest. Then Chloris unrolled the long thing wrapped in newspaper and showed me something that looked precisely like a stair-rod—a narrow length of iron about a yard long—and showed it to me.

"I want you to let me put this above the lintel of the door that leads from Gilda's room into the little dressing-room where you sleep now," she said. "I know that she doesn't often come into your dressing-room, but this will prevent her coming at all. It's iron—cold iron—which no witch can cross. Cold iron and running water, the two barriers that are proof against all witchcraft—and I want to see this in place before I leave tonight. Can do?"

"We'd better go upstairs, as though we were going to see Noel," I said thoughtfully. "Because if Irina saw us putting the rod up, she might tell Gilda—she's fascinated by Gilda, like a rabbit by a snake—and that would never do! I tell you what. We'll go and see Noel—who, by the way, is very much fitter and brighter since Gilda left."

"Of course," interjected Chloris. "What else did you expect? Come on! We'll go and see the baby, and while you talk to Irina, I'll say I want to go to the bathroom and slip along and put this in place above the dressing-room door."

Well, that was that, and I admit that I felt happier when the rod was in place and the little silver crucifix resting on my chest; even though I felt the latter was scarcely necessary since, as Chloris had said, I was the main source of the money she worshipped, Gilda was scarcely likely to do me any harm personally.

She continued to stay away until one day, about three weeks after she had left England, I received a telegram saying that Antonio Pirelli had died! A letter followed saying that his feverish illness had developed into a really serious matter, and at last, despite the assiduous attentions of the doctor—the new doctor, whose name I think was Chiozza, that Gilda had called in—he had died. The letter contained also the information that Gilda would now have to remain in Milan

until her father's will was proved and his affairs settled up.

I took the letter along with me that night to dinner with Chloris, my father and Aunt Mary; and after I had read it out, Chloris and I exchanged a long and meaning look with each other while our elders exclaimed and commiserated. Both of us, of course, were wondering the same thing—was Pirelli's death a natural thing or had Gilda, driven by her terror of being ousted from her position of her father's heiress, "assisted" his death in some subtle and sinister way of her own?

Terrible as it sounds to suspect a daughter of conniving at her father's death, I had long realized that as some children are born blind or deaf, Gilda had been either born without the power to love, or had stifled and strangled it long ago, perhaps many lives and centuries ago; and there was no gainsaying the fact that Antonio Pirelli's death was amazingly convenient for her! There was no possibility now of her father's marrying again and possibly producing a young family whose claim would certainly outweigh hers after his death. Now she was "sitting pretty" as the saying goes!

She could sell the business, which would fetch a good sum, as the old man had been well known and trusted and his stock was a fine and varied one; or she could keep it going and put in a good manager—possibly Andrea Morena, son of the Widow Moreno of whom she had spoken so scornfully. He had been Pirelli's chief assistant for years, and was an excellent judge of ceramics, as of other things, and a thoroughly reliable man . . . but a second letter from Gilda put paid to that idea.

It appeared that without telling her—at which I did not wonder, for her wrath would have been great, and old Pirelli was patently afraid of his daughter—some months before his death the old man had taken Moreno into partnership with him; and so Gilda would be staying in Milan longer than she had meant. She fully intended to squeeze Moreno out somehow and get the whole business into her hands, and that might take time. She had originally intended remaining there

until the funeral was over and the will proved, but now she could not say just when she would be able to return, though I could be sure she would be back for Christmas—even if she tried to rush back to Milan afterwards to tie things up. As it was now only early November, my heart frankly leapt with satisfaction to see myself allowed another spell of freedom; and as both my father and the baby Noel were now fine and improving daily in health and strength, my feeling that both their ailments were due in some mysterious way to Gilda was confirmed.

My father had not had a single heart-attack since she left London, while before he had had them, I know, two or three times a week; though he did not always tell me when they occurred when I was not with him. And as far as my little son Noel was concerned, it was astonishing how he had improved! He had grown plump and rosy, kept trying to talk, and far from falling asleep when he was put down on the floor, he would crawl around most energetically, and was now even trying to haul himself into a semi-standing position by catching hold of the legs of chairs or tables.

I knew it was sheer madness to see too much of Chloris; but I simply could not resist the temptation to make use of this unexpected spell of freedom, and I know she felt the same, so in sheer recklessness we saw each other as often as possible.

I took her to the theatre, we met often after she left the office for cocktails, she came to my house and played with Noel, whom she adored, and often we went dancing together; although this last was the hardest test of all, for the feel of her warm supple body moving close to mine in time to the music, of my arm round her waist and her soft cheek close to mine used to go to my head like wine, and it was all I could do sometimes not to squeeze her so tightly that she couldn't have gone on dancing, I had deprived her of breath!

My father, wise and diplomatic as he always was, said nothing, though I know he was well aware that I was seeing Chloris dangerously often; though I don't think Aunt Mary

ever realized this. Chloris had lots of friends and, as she afterwards told me, used to fib quite frankly when she was going out with me, and tell Aunt Mary she was meeting some woman friend or other.

So the time went on, and about halfway through December a triumphant letter arrived from Gilda saying that though she had had to pay Moreno more than she thought fair, he had sold his share of the business to her, and now she was in sole possession! She was arranging to sell the shop and its contents right away, and proposed to take flight for England within the next three days.

The delirious time of freedom with Chloris was over—and I did not dare to look at her as I broke the news. We had been dancing at one of the fashionable restaurants in London and she looked lovely, as always, in a "picture" frock of sea-green taffeta stamped with silver flowers, with a pair of silver "tassel" earrings that, greatly daring, I had offered her as a birthday present. As I told her my news she was silent a moment, then sighed.

"Well," she said, "it was inevitable that she should return some time, though one couldn't help wishing that this lovely time could have lasted longer."

I laid one hand on her warm bare arm, and she did not draw it away.

"It has been a lovely time, hasn't it?" I murmured, and she nodded.

"Oh yes—the loveliest time I ever had in my life! But now—let's go, Keith. I don't feel like dancing any more."

I nodded, beckoned the waiter for my bill, and together we left the crowded brightly lit room. The doorman got us a taxi, and when we were safely inside I simply couldn't help it—I turned and gathered her into my arms and kissed her desperately, kissed her as I'd wanted to for untold weeks, while her arm slid round my neck and she returned my kisses with all her heart until at last she drew away, breathless, and tried to sit upright. I let her go sufficiently to do that, but retained my arm round her waist and in the dark-

ness of the taxi we sat soberly and regarded each other. I spoke first, hoarsely, and finding my voice not quite under control.

"I shouldn't have done that, I know—but I bloody well couldn't help it!" She nodded and spoke in a whisper.

"I know, my dear—but I'm not going to say I'm sorry! I've wanted you to kiss me for weeks past—and that's the truth!"

"I suppose you know I'm madly in love with you?" I said, and she smiled a crooked little smile.

"If you want the truth, Keith, I think I've been in love with you since I was quite a little girl," she said. "So now we know the truth, and there it is. But oh God, where can it lead? Nowhere, since you're married to Gilda!"

"And Gilda would never divorce me," I said grimly, "since I'm the man who brings home the bacon she loves so much! And besides, there's the child. . . ."

Chloris shook her pretty head and then turned and buried it on my shoulder. I heard the sound of a small sob as she answered.

"There's no hope, Keith—I never had any, anyway! We must just try and be content to be friends, and see each other as often as we can without causing comment that might get to Gilda's ears. Don't forget that though she doesn't love you—I don't think, poor soul, that she's capable of loving anybody, really—you are her possession and she would be furious if anybody tried to take you away; and though up to date I don't think it's occurred to her to think of me being anything except a sort of cousin-cum-adopted-sister of yours—well, I don't like to think of her wrath if she ever suspected we were in love!"

"You mean she might turn these evil arts on you," I said and Chloris, sitting up, tried to pat her rumpled hair and frock into place, for the taxi was just turning into the street where she lived.

"She might try," she said, "but luckily Rena is experienced in this, and always keeps a spray of garlic and rosemary in my

room—and I wear a crucifix like yours every day. If I take that off to put on a necklace. I link it round one ankle under my stocking, so I'm never without it." The taxi stopped and she turned her dear face to mine with the impulsive innocence of the child she still was in many ways.

"Kiss me good night, here, Keith, and don't get out—and don't forget that although I let you kiss me tonight, and I'm not sorry, you must not conclude, whatever opportunity may come our way, that I intend things to go further than that. I adore you, and if ever there's a chance of our getting married, I'll marry you with joy! But—I will not be your mistress; so if I'm not always as—as forthcoming and responsive as I was tonight—don't think I've changed inside. I shall not change—but things must stop at a kiss, or I'll have to cut down our meetings."

I nodded—what could I say?—and brushed her soft mouth tenderly with mine; saw her get down from the taxi, mount the steps to the front door of the block of flats where she and Aunt Mary lived, and the taxi moved away. And I sat staring before me, seeing nothing but a long stretch of dreary years spent with a woman whom I already feared and could all too easily learn to hate. . . .

9

Gilda Returns and Satan Shows his Power

GILDA returned home some two weeks before Christmas, in a mood that puzzled me. She showed no particular signs of sorrow over her father's death, while on the one hand she was jubilant, the sale of her father's business having realized more than she had hoped for; and on the other hand, she showed irritation that she had been forced to buy young Moreno out of the said business! Although I soon found out that she had actually got him to sell her his share in the business for very much less than he had asked at first.

The young man was, I gathered, engaged to be married; he had, I know, always been in some considerable fear of his employer's formidable daughter, and so had been willing to forego what was plainly his due in order to get rid of her, and of any need to see her in the future. For if he had hung determinedly on to his half of the business, as he might well have done, certainly Gilda would have been flying over to Milan a dozen times a year, keeping an eye on things; and as I already knew that she did not get on with Moreno, who had, it seemed, proved proof against the physical blandishments she at first tried on him, that would certainly have resulted in constant friction between them. I suspected also another reason for his giving up what was, after all, a position worth a good deal in the business world. I knew that in Italy the existence of witches and witchcraft called there "*le Vecchia*

Religione", though officially denied by the church, is still strongly believed in by many of the working-class people, and for all I knew, by some of the more educated too; and it was more than possible that Gilda's queer looks and above all, queer ways, might well have brought her under local suspicion as a *Strega*, or witch. If that were so, it would probably be young Mareno's *fiancée* who had talked him into accepting a much smaller sum than he had originally hoped for, when he consented to sell out to Gilda. His girl-friend might well have believed in Gilda's uncanny powers—women are more apt to cling to ancient superstitions than are men—and told him that it was wiser to take what he could, and get out while the going was good! Anyway, the duel had ended in Gilda's getting her way, as she was in the habit of doing; and in consequence she arrived back in what was, for her, high spirits.

I did not see her greeting of Noel; but when I asked her at dinner that night if she wasn't pleased to see him looking so pink and plump, she looked sideways at me and pursing her lips together, shook her head. No, she didn't think she was all that pleased. English people were far too fond of fat babies, which didn't necessarily mean good health! She found Noel far too fat—at which, annoyed, I contradicted her, and said I had never seen him look so bonny and well since he was born.

She looked hard at me, but made no direct reply except to ask after my father; and when I said, on a note of triumph that I couldn't quite conceal that, like Noel, he had been better, during the two months of her absence, than he had been for ages, she smiled oddly and said that that proved, didn't it, that I had been making a fuss about nothing when I thought he had heart trouble?

I had no reply to this, and she went on, giving me a vivid description of her father's funeral, of the appearance of the widow Moreno, draped in black as though she was really his widow, at the church, of young Moreno's tiresome behaviour and final surrender, and many other things while I ate my

dinner and ruminated gloomily on the change that must now take place in my life, for the past two months so free!

I asked Gilda about her father's illness and death, and she was rather evasive.

Oh, it had been pneumonia, the result of a long-neglected chill, and he had not really been ill for very long before he died. She hadn't been satisfied with the old doctor who was looking after him, and had called in her friend, Dr. Chiozza, who was young and brilliant. He had been most assiduous, calling every day, sometimes twice a day—but it had been no use. Old Antonio had died quite peacefully. Dr. Chiozza had signed the death certificate, and the funeral had gone off quite smoothly. Curious, I asked her point blank whether her father's death had upset her, and she stared at me in silence. Then she said in a repressive sort of voice that of course it had—did I think she was so unnatural a daughter that she did not sorrow for her father? Though actually, she had seen little of him for years and so the loss did not affect her as badly as though she had been living with him. Now she was glad, really, that it was all over and she could dismiss Milan from her thoughts for ever!

Now she must work hard to complete her preparations for the Show she was planning in the spring . . . so she went babbling on while in my heart, burdened not only with misery, knowing how little I now dared to see of my darling Chloris, I was conscious of an increasing fear and anxiety about the future, which lay so plainly in the hands of this terrifying woman I had married.

I would have given worlds to pack my bags and leave her! But that meant leaving Noel, the tiny son who had already curled himself so firmly round my heart, and that was plainly impossible.

As she talked I found myself wondering if I could possibly find some means of terminating the afternoon sessions that the child spent in a cot near his mother's bed while his nurse went out for her official two hours off—and found no answer. Irina had been ordered to go out each afternoon by the doctor,

and what more natural thing could there be for the baby, in her absence, to be put in his mother's room while she took her siesta? Hopeless to try and explain to anybody like Dr. Barton the grim business that Chloris had seen, which got going directly the door was closed on the mother and child!

I found myself wondering also whether Pirelli's old doctor would have signed the death certificate, with its innocuous announcement that pneumonia was the cause of death, as easily as this Dr. Chiozza had done.

I dimly remembered meeting Chiozza once or twice when I had been in Milan, also hearing an argument between Gilda and her father in which she had tried to persuade him to shelve his own doctor, who was his own age or considerably older, and take on the younger man—and being much annoyed because Antonio had flatly refused. Chiozza I remembered as a plumpish young Italian, very highly qualified, it's true, but plainly completely under Gilda's spell. So she had won out in the end, as she generally did, and my heart sank even lower at the realization that as far as I could see we were all helpless in her hands. Now she was talking glibly about Christmas and the smart parties she meant to give. A big cocktail-party to which all the leading people in London's artistic circles would be invited, and a special dinner to which the best-known critics and their wives should come . . . watching her animated face I asked rather sardonically "And what about the traditional family Christmas party, eh? You should know what sticklers we British are for that sort of thing!"

Gilda looked at me steadily across the table, then smiled.

"Of course," she said, and her voice was at its most dulcet. "I shall do the accepted thing! Invite your father and Aunt Mary and Chloris and any other relatives you think you ought to invite, to a dinner complete with turkey and sausages with pudding to follow—ugh, how I hate that stodgy mixture of fruit and flour and sugar you call a Christmas pudding!—and I intend to give very handsome Christmas

presents this year. I've brought some back from Italy—but to Chloris, since she has been looking after you so nicely in my absence, I mean to give my Humming Bird."

I looked up from my plate sharply. Did that oblique crack about "Chloris looking after you so nicely," mean anything, or didn't it? And what did she mean by giving Chloris her humming bird, the best piece out of all the new models she had been making during the past six months? Certainly, all her work was fine, original, colourful and brilliantly executed—but I felt that the humming bird was the best thing she had done up to date and was sure to be the star turn at her show in the early spring.

"D'you mean that, really?" I said cautiously. "I thought that was to be the centre piece at your Exhibition?"

Gilda shrugged her shoulders and carefully selected a tangerine from the heaped dish of fruit that after removing our sweet plates, Maria had just placed on the table before us.

"Why not?" she said. "I could still show it. I don't suppose Chloris would mind lending it to me for the few weeks that the Show will last?"

"I'm sure she wouldn't," I said, and I know my tone sounded puzzled, for puzzled I was. Gilda was not notable for her generosity, and though she was always polite and outwardly friendly to Chloris, I had an inner feeling—possibly born of my own feeling of guilt about Chloris—that she did not really like her any more than she liked Aunt Mary. I shrugged my shoulders and sat silent until Gilda had finished her tangerine, got up from the table, and led the way into the drawing-room for coffee. I made to turn on the television set, but Gilda told me that it was out of order and the man couldn't come to put it right until the next day. So feeling thoroughly disgruntled—as an entire evening spent making conversation with Gilda was just what I wanted to avoid—I sank into an armchair and sprang to my feet with a curse as the cat Satan, upon whom I had all but sat, slipped away from the chair with a yelp and a spit of fury.

Gilda held out her arms and he fled into them, and she sat

stroking him and watching me with a faintly malicious smile on her lips as she did so.

"You hate Satan, don't you?" she said, and I fidgeted uncomfortably. I did hate the brute, of course, but I did not want to admit this openly, so I hedged.

"I certainly don't like him much," I said, "but then I don't care for cats as a race. I'm a dog-lover—and I'd like a dog, only you told me you couldn't get on with them."

"Nor can I," said Gilda calmly. "They're a dull, bovine set of brutes, while cats are intelligent to a degree. Satan, for instance, understands far more than you realize." She sat tickling the cat under its lifted chin, and now the creature was purring with pleasure as she went on. "Now, I can influence Satan into doing anything I want him to do. He's been with me for months and months now, and there's a very close link between us."

"What do you mean?" I asked idly. I wasn't really interested, but one had to talk about something, and Satan was a safer subject than many I could think of. Gilda smiled and went on tickling the cat.

"I mean what I say," she said after a moment. "I've only to tell Satan to do something and he will do it. Shall I show you?"

"If you like," I said suppressing a yawn. "Suppose you send him to fetch something from the dining-room—I know!" I felt in my coat-pocket. "I've left my lighter there—I know I had it when I went into dinner, as I lighted a cigarette from it just before we came out. I must have left it on the table."

"That's easy," said Gilda, setting the cat down on the floor. Lifting its head so that it was looking directly into her eyes, she stared at it for a moment, then murmured some words I couldn't catch and released the beast. It wandered out of the room, and after a moment's wait it returned—and by all that's wonderful, in its mouth it carried my lighter!

Now I was really surprised and sat up and stared as Gilda taking the lighter from the creature's mouth, handed it over to me with a triumphant smile.

"Good Lord!" I ejaculated. "Now that is interesting, Gilda! How on earth did you tell the creature what to do?" Gilda shook her head, but her lips bore a faint smile of triumph.

"Don't you know I'm a witch?" she said teasingly, and I averted my eyes, for I was startled. Had she, in some uncanny way, divined the grim suspicion I had discussed with Chloris? Or was she merely mocking me, in the half-serious half-malicious way typical of her sense of humour?

"Don't be silly," I said. "You're playing with me—but I should really like to know just how you did it? And what you said to Satan under your breath before you sent him out of the room?"

She looked at me and now her smile was definitely malicious. "Let's call it a trick of the trade, shall we?" she said. "In Italy I've often been called a *strega*—a witch—as according to them, everybody who had red hair and green eyes is a witch! So for the present let me live up to my name as one! Let's say that I muttered a spell over Satan so that he knew what he was to look for—anyway, he found it, so there you are!"

"If it's only a trick, it's a damn clever one," I said. "Now make him do something else. There are three cushions on the sofa, now. Make him go and sit on one particular cushion—say the middle one, the red one!"

Gilda nodded, lifted the cat's chin—it had taken refuge, after delivering my lighter, on her knee—looked into its eyes raised to hers, muttered again some words I couldn't hear and set it down on the floor on its feet. It paused for a moment, looking round the room; and then I'm hanged if it didn't go straight for the sofa, jump up on it, and going to the red cushion, curled itself up on it and laying its chin on its paws, seemed to look at us as we watched with, it seemed to me, the shadow of Gilda's derisive smile in its slitted eyes. Now I was really startled.

"Now that's amazing!" I said. "Try it again, Gilda—you know, you're beginning to make me think you really *are* a witch, watching this damned cat of yours!"

"Now I'll make him walk the maze," said Gilda, her green eyes fixed on the black heap curled on the cushion. "Come on Satan, I've something else for you to do."

Half reluctantly, it seemed, Satan uncurled himself from the red cushion, stretched, yawned and, jumping down, came obediently to his mistress and climbed upon her knee. Once more she went through the same odd business of fixing the cat's eyes with her own, murmuring something to it and setting it down—and then began the oddest and in many ways the most uncanny performance I had ever seen!

One of the many foreign treasures that I was proud to possess was a lovely Chinese carpet that had been sent to me from Peking as a wedding present—and it bore a curious and ancient pattern strongly resembling a maze. A circular network of interlacing whorls and loops and lengths of narrow colour like a tangle of ribbons; a tangle difficult to analyse but which, mysterious as it seems, when analysed resulted in a perfect piece of intricate and beautiful design.

Now Satan was pacing this pattern, following, I could see, one particular red line, with the greatest care, pace by pace, evidently following some definite plan or other, until at last he arrived at the end of the tangle of lines and loops and twirls, and sat himself down on the red boss that was the middle with an air of calm triumph that was positively human. I looked at Gilda and she nodded at me—and at that moment her green eyes wore the self-same look of triumph I had glimpsed in the cat's.

"You see?" she said, and rising to her feet picked up Satan and turned towards the door. "I told you so—cats are uncanny beasts. Satan found the way to the centre of the maze without difficulty—I told him to do so. He'll do any mortal thing I tell him—and if you think its witchcraft, you can think it if you like, I don't care! And now I'm going to bed early—there's something I want to read. When you come up, come into the dressing-room quietly, will you, in case I drop asleep?"

I nodded and bade her good night. But I sat alone for a

long time staring at the fire. The whole uncanny experience had startled and shaken me a lot, and it had gone far towards confirming me in the belief I had discussed with Chloris—that Gilda had indeed, in a great measure, the powers that had once distinguished the evil women known as witches. It remained for a future day to prove just what she could do via Satan. . . .

Needless to say, I told Chloris about Gilda's intention of giving her such an unexpectedly handsome present, and she was as surprised as I; but she promised she would lend it to Gilda for showing at her Exhibition in the spring, and thanked me for telling her, so that she could in her turn give Gilda a present that would not compare too badly with the Humming Bird.

This turned out to be a handsome flagon of Gilda's favourite French perfume, which Chloris brought with her to the "family" Christmas dinner-party that Gilda had promised to arrange—which she did for Christmas Eve; and as usual with Gilda's parties, it went off very well. Gilda's presents for everybody were set in their places and very gay they all looked, especially the Humming Bird, which stood on its blackwood pedestal in Chloris' place, dominating the table by its beauty and its vivid colouring. Gilda had given me a new cardigan that morning and I had given her a string of amber beads that she had long coveted—every sort of amber was represented in it, for amber does not only come in the usual honey-yellow colour, as most people think. You can find, if you take the trouble to look, red amber, brown amber, even green amber, sometimes pale olive and at times almost as dark a green as agate; so Gilda was pleased, and therefore in her most gracious mood. She gave my father a handsome new leather wallet with his initials on it in gold—though I knew, when he thanked her for it, that nothing would divorce him from his old wallet of ostrich-skin that he had bought in South Africa and used ever since; and she gave Aunt Mary a delicately lovely fichu of old Breton lace, with which she was enchanted, promptly putting it round the shoulders of

the black velvet gown she wore and wearing it there for the rest of the evening.

But the bulk of the praise and admiration went of course to the Humming Bird, and after dinner, when we all went into the drawing-room for our coffee, Chloris carried it with her and set it on the mantelpiece where, reflected in the large mirror behind it, it perched, looking down on the room with a disdain that was justified by its beauty.

I was handing Chloris her cup of coffee when she said "I'm wondering where it would look best. Where do you think, Aunt Mary? In the drawing-room? But you've got such a crowd of lovely things there already...."

Gilda, who was pouring out the coffee, looked up sharply.

"Oh not there!" she said firmly. "I can only really see it in one place, and that's on the top of the Regency escritoire in your bedroom, Chloris."

Now, this escritoire had been one of the many pieces of furniture that my father had given Aunt Mary and her step-daughter when they came to London, and it was a charming piece indeed. A tall narrow affair in walnut and rosewood, looking like a chest of drawers, but with the middle section, which was carved to look just like the three centre ones of a tall range of drawers, actually pulling out and down to form a desk, with a group of little inner drawers and shelves above and behind it for notepaper, stamps and the other impedimenta needed on a regular writing-table. Chloris had fallen in love with it at sight, and it had been placed in her room, where she used it regularly; though not for her typing, as the jutting-out piece of wood that formed the desk, despite the two struts that pulled out to support it, was not strong enough to carry the weight of a modern typewriter.

I could see what Gilda meant. I knew that Chloris had mentioned several times that she was looking out for a specially bright and colourful piece of china to set on top of the escritoire. Most of the rest of the furniture in Chloris' room was Regency, the bed one of those with charmingly curved sides that are known as *berceau* beds, the dressing-table a small

cabinet of rosewood with metal mounts like the bed, and the three matching chairs also of the same period and of dark polished wood; and I could see where the room, with its handsome dark furnishings, could do with a gayly coloured piece or two of china. At present the *escritoire* bore a handsome Ming plate set upright on a carved wood stand. But that wasn't quite what Chloris felt the room needed.

"Yes, it would be lovely there," she agreed with Gilda. "But somehow it seems a shame to maroon it in my bedroom, where only the favoured few who are allowed in can see it! I've a feeling it ought to be somewhere where more people can see it—that's why I suggested the drawing-room. And I still think...."

Gilda interrupted quickly.

"Oh, but," she said, "you yourself said that the drawing-room was crowded already." She handed Aunt Mary her coffee with her most charming smile. "Indeed, your drawing-room is a positive mine of interest, Aunt Mary, with such wonderful things collected from all over the world—it always fascinated me! But amongst so many treasures, I'm afraid my poor little Humming Bird would be completely swamped—and I'd be much happier to think of him reigning all alone in Chloris' lovely room! Now promise me you'll put it there, Chloris, or I'll never forgive you!"

Laughing, Chloris promised—and just then three of Gilda's many friends came in for coffee. She often invited a few favourites in for coffee and drinks after dinner, saying she liked seeing people, but she didn't see why she should feed them every time; and the rest of the evening passed off in talk, some music, as two of the newcomers, a husband and wife, people called Letsome, were professional singers, plus an interesting display of what I suppose must have been sleight-of-hand by another man. His name was Vronski, I gathered—either a Russian or a Pole—and he certainly had a remarkable gift of some sort, though today I'm not really certain of what sort it was.

He could, and did, make things disappear from one's pockets

and reappear in a far corner of the room; and a little table on which he laid one hand, the fingertips only, proceeded to jump about, balance on one of its four slender legs and hop and jerk as though trying to dance; and he read hands too—seemingly with uncanny correctness, or so his “sitters” declared.

I didn't really want my hand read; but as I passed where he was sitting, to go to the corner cupboard when we kept most of the drinks, to find a fresh soda water syphon, he had just concluded giving a reading to Mrs. Letsome and was sitting back listening to her flattering encomiums on his gifts. As he passed he caught my hand and held it, turning it so that he could see the palm. Reluctantly I turned—after all, he was my guest and one couldn't be directly rude—and he took my other hand and studied them both intently.

The whole room was silent, interested, watching him, and when after a moment he closed my two hands together, palm to palm, and gave them back to me without a word, there arose a general protest.

“Oh, Mr. Vronski, you *must* have seen something—tell us what you read in Keith's hand?” “Go on, tell us, no matter what it is” and so on, and the odd little man smiled and shook his head. By this time I myself was feeling curious—for by the very intentness of the way in which he had studied my hands I was sure he had read something in them. So I added my voice to the general protest, and at last he answered briefly enough.

“An interesting life, Mr. Randolph, but as yet hardly begun.”

“What on earth do you mean?” I asked puzzled.

“What I say—as yet hardly begun. Before you lie two deaths—perhaps three. If three—then you will begin to live!” I looked as the rest of us did, puzzled.

“But what does that mean?” I began, but he shook his head again.

“Don't ask me what I mean,” he said. “All I can do is to say what I see in a person's hand—and *that* is what I see in

yours." His eyes, strange eyes, dark brown with a luminous gleam in them, stared into mine. "All I know is that this is true. Up to now you have not fully lived as a man—as a child, yes, and I think rather a spoilt child—but that is different. Until and unless you are free—and this you will not be until *three* deaths happen—you will not function completely, as a whole man."

IO

I Visit Dr. Vronski

THE odd little man would say no more, but turned to Gilda, who had been listening avidly, and asked her to sing for him a Russian folk song he loved. Gilda, whose repertoire of folk-songs in various languages was a large one, consented at once, and the rest of the evening was spent in music. But what Vronski had said to me stuck oddly in my head; and when, on saying good night, he shook me by the hand and looked me hard in the eyes and said he wished me good luck, I suddenly felt that I wanted to see him again and talk to him—but in private.

All I knew of him was that he had known Gilda years ago when he was spending some time in Italy—he was an archaeologist of considerable repute as well as a student of psychic research; but he had been a friend of her father's rather than of hers, as he was a man well into his sixties, at least. The Letsomes were friends of his, and Gilda had run across him very recently while he was having tea with them, and invited him to accompany the Letsomes to our house for after-dinner drinks. Needless to say, I didn't ask her for his address, or she would at once have wanted to know why I wanted it! But I was pretty sure that it would be in her address book, as Gilda was meticulous in such matters. Moreover, from a purely business angle, she never failed to make a note of the address of any person who might possibly be of use to

her; and Vronski in his own line was, I gathered, quite a famous man.

I was right. The address was there—a flat in a block down Battersea way. So when the Christmas festivities were over and we had settled into the New Year routine, I rang Vronski from the office and asked if I could come and have a chat with him sometime? His voice in reply sounded puzzled at first, but when I gave my name it cleared at once. Yes, of course he remembered me and the charming evening he had spent at my delightful house with my accomplished wife, who sang so beautifully the songs of his childhood in Russia—songs of the old Russia now, alas, vanished! He would be very pleased to see me. But—and now his voice became decisive—if I wanted him to explain further what he had seen written in my hand, it would be a waste of time for me to come; he had no more to tell me than what I had already heard.

I hastily assured him that that was not why I wanted to see him. I merely wanted a general talk about the things in which I knew he was an expert; and after a moment's pause he agreed, and fixed a date—a date a fortnight ahead, as he had, he said, to go over to Paris for a special conference that was being held there. So I hung up the telephone, made a note of the date and went back to work; but my mind was not at ease, for my father had started having these mysterious heart attacks again!

He had had one, a bad one, in the office the very first day he had started work again in the New Year; and though, as usual, when we had administered the remedies the doctor had given us and made him lie down and rest on the comfortable old sofa in his private room off the office, after half an hour or so he was quite all right, the suddenness with which these attacks had begun again, after Gilda's return from Milan, set my mind thinking along very ugly lines indeed!

What if my father were to die? That might well be the first of the three deaths that Vronski had seen in my hands! He had seen two deaths about which he seemed to be certain, while about the third death—that death that in some

mysterious way was to bring about my "freedom"—he had been a good deal less certain than about the first two. Regarding the rest of what he had said, I had given a good deal of thought to this, and I thought I knew what he meant.

It was certainly true that in many ways I had been a spoilt child, and kept so by a very indulgent father—kept so for too long. I now realized that my impulsive marriage to Gilda had been rather the act of a greedy child than that of a responsible man; and I also knew that since the marriage I had grown sharply and painfully out of being a child, and now the pains of manhood were heavy on me whenever I looked at Chloris, the woman that I knew I loved with a depth and steadfastness that Gilda had never awakened within me. But what did Vronski mean when he talked about my "not being free" until the third death? This was beyond me, and after much anxious thought I gave up the idea of solving the riddle, and spent the fortnight that must elapse before I could see Vronski in hard work and in anxious watching of both my father and my son.

Was it my imagination, or was Noel, after a few days, beginning to lose his rosy colour and chubby outline as my father's health was plainly dwindling? Now badly alarmed about his condition, my father's secretary Miss Ambrose, who had been with him for many years and was devoted to him, now kept me informed of the occasional heart attacks he had when I was not there to see; and as the number and frequency of these seemed to increase I grew more and more worried.

Time and again I told myself that I was allowing my fears—yes, and the superstitions I had been studying and discussing with Chloris—to influence me into morbid imaginings that might well be simply that—morbid imaginings! And yet, try as I would, I could not help connecting with Gilda, my wife, my father's increasingly frequent heart attacks, and the growing pallor and lassitude that were now plainly replacing normal health in the child who during Gilda's absence had grown so plump and vigorous! I was not the only one

who noticed it, and indeed, it was Chloris who at last voiced my own fears one day after she had paid us a visit, and according to her usual custom had run up to the nursery to see and play with Noel. On coming down to the drawing-room where Gilda and I were having pre-dinner drinks, she said bluntly to Gilda.

"Noel's looking pale today, Gilda—are you having the doctor to him? He doesn't look half as well as he did, and he's lost his old energy and seems lethargic?"

Gilda smiled her cat's smile as she poured out a sherry for Chloris.

"Oh, Noel's all right," she said easily, "If he were *really* ailing, of course I should send for a doctor at once. If he is looking pale it is probably because he's been eating too many sweeties—Keith will give them to him, though I tell him not to often enough!"

I glanced at my wife but said nothing, though the accusation was definitely false. Mindful of a baby's delicate tummy, I rarely gave Noel anything to eat, and then only a tiny piece of barley sugar or some other sweetmeat of which the doctor approved. So the matter passed off; but my heart sank, seeing that Chloris had noticed, as I had, the change in my little son's health. Where, where was this ghastly business to end?

Why I should have got an idea that a talk to the odd little bearded man I had only once met might help me to come to some decision, I did not know; but I did, and awaited the date he had given me with impatience during the fortnight that had to elapse before his return from Paris. At last the day of my appointment came, and after I had finished my work in the office I hailed a taxi and set out to find his flat.

He lived in a tall, rather shabby and certainly unfashionable block of flats in Battersea; but the flat itself, when he admitted me, though again shabby, was comfortably furnished, warm, and lined on every wall with books, and the mantelpiece and a set of shelves in one corner bore a plentiful array of fascinating curios; it was plain that the little man

was not only widely read, but much travelled. I doffed my coat, at his suggestion, and sat down in a scuffed but comfortable leather airmchair by the fire while he faced me in my chair's fellow, and indicated with a wave of his hand the little coffee table that stood at his elbow, bearing a beaten brass tray that bore a varied array of bottles and glasses.

"You will take a drink, Mr. Randolph?" he asked. "I have here vodka, slivovitz and a variety of foreign liqueurs—or would you prefer the British whisky and soda?"

"I think I would," I said rather diffidently, and he nodded. Smiling and rising, he produced a bottle of whisky and a syphon from somewhere in the background and set them down beside me with a glass.

"Help yourself, now, while I have some of my favourite slivovitz—plum brandy." He poured a tot of the purple coloured liqueur into an acorn-shaped glass of cut crystal, smelt it, sipped it and setting it down, spoke bluntly.

"Now let us get down to what you call brass tacks, Mr. Randolph. What can I do for you? For I know very well that you've not come to see me simply because you think I am a nice chap and want to meet me again!" I flushed, for there was a faint bite in the little man's tone—yet what he said was true. His English was well nigh perfect but for a faintly foreign stress here and there, and his eyes were fixed on mine—I nodded. I would have to "come clean"—illbred though he might think it in me to discuss my wife.

"You're quite right," I said. "I believe you used to know my wife in Italy—and I'm worried about her, Dr. Vronski."

He nodded in his turn.

"I did know her, but never very well," he said, "I was a friend of her father's mostly. I met him when I was in Milan going in for a course of special studies, and we met and liked each other—and so I saw something of his daughter. That was when she was a young girl, before her first marriage."

"What were you studying?" I asked. He looked at me oddly.

"I am by profession an archaeologist," he said. "But I take

an interest in many other things. In particular I am interested in psychic study—in what I suppose you might call magic." My heart leapt high.

"That's what I wondered," I began. "Well, I meant that I believe my wife is—or was—interested in all that too. Was she when you knew her?"

There was a long pause while he sipped again at his brandy and stared into the fire.

When at last he spoke it was slowly, almost as though he was choosing his words carefully.

"See here, my son—you will forgive me calling you that for I am certainly old enough to be your father? Why do you ask these questions? Do you *fear* that your wife may be what you call interested in magic?"

I nodded and he went on thoughtfully, still staring into the fire.

"This I do not, of course, know. All I know of your wife in these later days is that I was pleased to meet her again some days ago, at the house of my friends the Letsomes, and pleased to come to her house, where she was a charming hostess and seemed glad to receive me. You will, I hope, understand that when I used the word 'Magic' I do not of necessity mean what is called the *black magic*?" I nodded and he went on. "You know that all magic is simply calling up and making use of powers little understood of ordinary people, and that these powers are in themselves *neutral*, neither good nor evil. It is the use to which they are put that makes black magic or white!"

"Yes, I do understand that," I said, remembering my talks to Chloris. "But I don't like the idea. . . ." He smiled dryly.

"You don't like the idea of these powers being used at all!" he finished. "But you cannot stop that, my son! All down the ages certain people—ambitious people, greedy people, vengeful people, alas, as well as students who seek knowledge for its own sweet sake—have learnt to call them up and use them, and, I fear, all too often for mean and evil ends. Now, it would not surprise me to find that your wife knew how to

get in touch with these powers, though naturally I do not know in what way she might wish to use them." He paused and took another drink, then went on slowly.

"All I know is that when I was in Milan all those years ago, one of the things I went there to do was to join a Group that worked there at that time specifically for the study of magic—though I did not tell Antonio Pirelli of this. Students of the Mysteries learn early to hold their tongues!" He smiled dryly. "This Group was operated by a fine man, half-Russian, half-Italian, called Geronimo Lesando, and his wife Isolda. And it was here that I met your wife, who was then only about eighteen, one of the younger group of students that went to the meetings of this Group. I was interested in her, as she was—as she still is—an attractive woman, and such women are rarely drawn towards the serious and difficult study of magic; and when I saw that she was a bosom friend of Isolda's, I felt oddly disquieted. I knew and trusted Geronimo—but I did not trust his wife!" Here he paused and seemed to consider a moment before going on.

"How shall I say this, to be strictly fair? But when one has been an ardent student of psychic matters for many years, one develops what you could call, in your way, a 'hunch'; and while at the meetings of the Group at Geronimo's house that I attended, Isolda was the perfect hostess and partner to her husband, yet all the time I felt a certain sense of withdrawal, shall I say, towards her." He paused again and went on.

"She was a small, black-haired woman with a curious scar down one cheek—the result, she said, of a serious accident when she was a child—and she had a powerful, almost hypnotic personality that charmed and held many members of the Group . . . and when later on I hear rumours that Isolda had formed a small group of her own, independent of her husband, I began to feel somewhat worried. For I could not imagine why Isolda should form a group without her husband, and without informing him—for he, it was plain, knew nothing at all about this, which fact I and others established

by means of discreet questioning! If Isolda was running a secret Group unbeknown to her husband, it was pretty obvious that the work of that Group was likely to be work directed to no good end—and as I suspected that the girl Gilda would be a member of Isolda's Group, I grew very disquieted. But there was nothing that I could do—and as I left Milan shortly afterwards, I can tell you no more."

I rose and held out my hand.

"Nevertheless, you have told me much, Dr. Vronski," I said. "I had no idea that my wife's interest in the study of magic dates back so far—and I have never heard her speak of anybody called Lesando, though I know many of her Milan friends. Let's hope it has all faded out now."

He looked at me.

"Yet you do not think it has, or you would not have come to ask me questions about it!" he said shrewdly. "And as far as that goes, I know that Isolda Lesando is in London now, though whether she is living or merely staying here, I do not know. I heard that after the death of her good husband she left Italy—and I saw her, though she did not see me, crossing Oxford Street only a few days ago!"

"Good God!" I said startled—and then told myself not to be a fool. I remembered that I had had to look up in Gilda's address book the telephone number of the Letsomes, as Celia Letsome had left a silver cigarette lighter of hers in our drawing-room after the visit that she, her husband and Vronski had paid us; and I was quite certain that there had been no "Lesando" among the "L's" there.

"Well, if she is, I'm sure my wife isn't seeing her," I said firmly and held out my hand. "Anyway, thank you for seeing me Dr. Vronski, and I hope your vision of three deaths ahead of me isn't true!"

He shook my hand gravely.

"It is true," he said sadly. "I read these things, but I cannot always explain them—two deaths, alas, are certain for you, yet three deaths are better, as with the third death will come—release! Remember that, my son—and cling to prayer and

to your belief in the good in man, which comes from God. You should wear a protective amulet such as a crucifix."

I nodded. "I do," I said. "I'm not a Roman Catholic, but a friend who knows my anxiety about my wife gave me a silver crucifix and made me promise to wear it."

He smiled. "She—it was a woman, I guess—is right," he said. "And now, my son, good-bye. God bless you and keep up your heart, whatever happens."

I needed his good wishes, for when I got home there was an agitated message awaiting me on the pad in the hall—a message from my father's secretary. My father had had a severe heart attack in the office—he had stayed late there working after I had left—and though the doctor had been sent for and all possible remedies applied while they awaited him, my father had died!

I I

The First Death

NEEDLESS to say, the shock and horror of this news sent the thought of Gilda and everything else right out of my head.

I raged furiously against the Fates who had forbidden me to be present at my father's passing, though both the doctor and Miss Ambrose, my father's secretary, told me that I could have done nothing and he would not have had time to speak to me. He had been perfectly all right during the daytime, had even been discussing going to a play that he wanted to see, and had told his secretary to ring me up about this on the following day and find out whether I and my wife would care to come with him; in which case she was to book a box, and a special table at the Savoy Grill for supper afterwards. But soon after taking him in his usual five o'clock cup of tea into the office, Miss Ambrose had heard the sound of a fall and rushing in, had found my father lying unconscious beside his desk, having fallen out of his chair.

He was still alive then, and breathing faintly, and soon after the doctor arrived, at a run, for he was very fond of my grand old father, as indeed were most people. But there was nothing he could do, and very soon my father died, quietly and without regaining consciousness! so I could not have done anything had I been there. And yet I raged and cursed that I was not there, and at first blamed it all on poor Vronski, whose appointment with me had been the cause of my leaving the office earlier than my usual time.

For at least two weeks I was not only badly shocked and grieved, but too rushed with arrangements for my father's cremation and the settling of his affairs to have time or inclination for worry about anything else.

As may have been gathered from the earlier part of this chronicle, my father and I had a peculiarly close and happy relationship, and I missed his comradeship, his gentle humour, his kindly understanding, more and more each day. Having lost my mother as a mere baby, I had grown up with my father in a companionship that seemed to combine that of father, mother and friend alike; I knew very well that I should miss him all my life, and my sorrow was deep and painful, as may be imagined.

And all the time there rang at the back of my busy and confused mind Vronski's words "*two deaths lie before you!*" And lo and behold, here was the first death! The little man had been right. And the second?

I would not let myself dwell on the possibility of the second death, but drove grimly ahead with the necessary arrangements, noting with a certain sardonic amusement that Gilda, who had never liked or appreciated my father, nevertheless bore herself with the correct amount of sympathetic understanding; donned the requisite black, much as she hated it, for the cremation service, treated me with unusual consideration and, as might have been expected from so superb an actress, showed herself, to the eyes of the world at least, in every way the ideal wife to a sorely bereaved man. Chloris and her stepmother, Aunt Mary, came to the service, and I could see, from their pink rimmed eyes and sober demeanour, that my father's death had shocked and distressed them also. I had no chance, of course, of speaking to Chloris until the funeral arrangements and the business of proving my father's Will and so on could be settled; but I had every intention of doing so as soon as the circumstances made it possible.

Actually, the business side of things was settled quickly and easily. My father had left a simple will, leaving the business as well as his property to me, barring various odd

personal articles to his closest friends, and a few legacies—one, I was glad to note, to Miss Ambrose, who had been so good and faithful a secretary to him for many years. She was no longer young, and this legacy, which was a handsome one, would, carefully invested as it was, provide her with a comfortable basic income so that in future she need only take such work as she chose, and could do this in the comfort of her own home.

As I sat talking to our lawyer, I could not help thinking bitterly of how pleased my wife would be at the death of my father! She had itched, ever since our marriage, for my father either to retire or, better still, to die, so that the whole of the very prosperous business known as "Randolph & Son" would be in my hands, and my income correspondingly doubled or trebled! And straight on the heels of this, there came to me a mental shock so sharp that for the moment I lost hold of what the lawyer was saying. Could it be possible that Gilda, my wife, had had some hand in this grimly-sudden death of the man she had always wanted out of the way? I answered mechanically as Foster talked on, though at the moment I hadn't the least idea of what he was saying, until with a great effort I pulled my attention back to him so that he noticed nothing. After the interview was over and he had left, I sat still for a moment, staring before me.

Why the thought that Gilda, with her strange and alarming powers, might have used them against my father, should have come as a shock to me I can't think, now. After all, I was pretty sure that the death of Gilda's first husband, Quarenghi, had been no mere chance; and there had been the mysterious death by drowning of the woman Pirelli had planned to marry, as well as the death of Pirelli himself—ghastly as it was to imagine that a daughter would do anything to bring about the death of her father!

But by this time I knew that Gilda's only real passion in life was for money and the power it brought with it—and there was no blinking the fact that all these three deaths had been very much to her advantage.

At last I told my secretary, Miss Burton, a quiet, efficient little woman who had worked for me for several years, that I had an attack of neuralgia coming on, and proposed to go home and take something to relieve it, and keep quiet for the rest of the day; it was then only about five o'clock and early for me to quit the office—but I simply had to get away by myself for awhile and try to straighten out my thinking. Putting on my hat and coat, I went off to the Green Park—a place where I often took refuge, as it was near to Bury Street and I loved the great trees, the ducks and geese on the lake, and in the summer the gorgeous beds of flowers; and as I strode, I tried hard to decide whether I was allowing a childish belief in ancient superstition to tie up with Gilda's undoubtedly queer ways in such a fashion that I was persuading myself into suspecting all sorts of terrible and unlikely things about her; or whether . . . and it was my mental hesitation before that "whether" that finally decided me into going home to try and find out some definite proof one way or another about Gilda.

I remembered thankfully that she had told me she would be dining out with the Letsomes—she had suggested that I came with her, but I had hastily invented a dinner with a business friend and had, in fact, intended to dine at my Club. Glancing at my watch, I saw that it was now nearly seven o'clock and, as the Letsomes dined early, Gilda would have dressed early and taken her car out for her daily spin before arriving there; the house would be blessedly empty but for Maria and Irina, who did not count. Leaving the Park, I hailed a taxi and within a quarter of an hour was letting myself into my home—the home that I had planned so hopefully, that now seemed more like a prison than the happy centre of my life, as I had once dreamed!

Hanging up my outdoor things I went into the drawing-room, poured myself out a stiff drink and then hunted out Gilda's address book and went carefully through the "L" section again. I had a strong feeling that if she had been on such close friendly terms as Vronski had described with the woman

called Isolda, when she lived in Milan, the chances were that if Isolda had come to live in London, they would get in touch with each other; especially as both were interested in the same uncanny studies. But there was no "Lesando" there and I hesitated—then, struck with a sudden idea, I turned to the section devoted to those names beginning with the letter "I".

I was right. It was there! Simply "Isolda" minus any surname or any address; merely a telephone number and a few words scribbled alongside the name in Gilda's hand. "Every third Friday at 7.30 p.m." What could those meetings be but gatherings of Isolda's own Group—and the odds were, that she would be using that Group as she had done before in Milan, for the study and, I felt certain, the practice of Black Magic! But again, of this I had no solid proof, and short of going to one of the Group meetings, I was never likely to know what went on at them.

Angry and disheartened, I returned the book to its usual place and, going into Gilda's workroom, stood for a moment looking about me. As I stared, I remember sending up a strong mental prayer that somehow, in some way, I might be guided into finding some real proof of Gilda's doings so that I could know whether my fears that these doings were deliberately and intentionally evil, were justified, or not . . . and to this day I feel sure that that prayer of mine was answered, in the strangest way.

For a few minutes I wandered vaguely round the workroom, eyeing its usual clutter of clay, tools, painting materials, jars filled with brushes, cloths both wet and dry, the wet ones shrouding some model or other on which Gilda was still working, so that it would be kept damp. Today there were no new models arranged on the table, the new ones were still baking in the kiln; yet I wandered about still, wondering why I did not leave the place, and yet urged by some strange inner impulse to stay there and continue my apparently purposeless meandering.

I looked through the row of books on the single bookshelf, and noted that they were all concerned with the making or

collecting of fine china and porcelain—I don't know quite what I expected to find, as Gilda was far too clever a woman to allow an array of books on magic to be there on display in her workroom. There were two or three hooks on the wall on which hung two overalls, one stained and smeared with clay, the other comparatively clean; and in one corner there was a large waste-paper-basket brimming with oddments. I pulled this out and, setting it on the table, picked out and examined one by one the bits and pieces with which it was filled. Odd pieces of paper, cigarette stubs, scribbled notes, apple cores, a few sweet-wrappers and many scraps of clay; two or three little bundles of newspaper which, when I unwrapped them, contained bits of broken models that had evidently not pleased their maker, who had scrapped them and started again; I knew what a perfectionist Gilda was about her work, and it was one of the few things that I still admired about her.

There was a handful of ravelled wool and a few bits of dress material and more torn paper, newspapers and otherwise, but nothing else. Disappointed, I pushed the rubbish back into the wastepaper basket and went to put it back in its corner. Then as I set it down I saw that another little bundle of crumpled newspaper was just peeping out from beneath the edge of the long velvet curtain that had hidden it until my moving of the basket had pulled the curtain aside. Evidently Gilda had thrown whatever was in the paper bundle carelessly so that it did not fall into the basket, but beside it, and it had been hidden by the curtain until by chance I had moved the curtain. I stooped to pick it up, thinking it would be another discarded model, broken into bits and wrapped in paper—but the thing felt oddly solid and heavy in my hand. Curious, I opened it and saw something that set my heart beating like a mad thing!

It was the clay model of a man, and plainly of my father! The clay was still soft, it had not been baked, and it was about five or six inches high. The face was indefinite, but the head was bald, with a tonsure of dark hair round the skull,

and a short beard covered the lower half of the face—both just what my father had worn. The figure had on dark trousers, but wore one thing that made its identity definite; for dinner at night my father still kept up the now old-fashioned habit of changing for dinner—he always wore a maroon-coloured velvet coat. And the figure wore a coat of precisely the same maroon! But that was not the worst. As the evil thing lay on the palm of my shaking hand, I saw that through the soft clay of the body, just where the heart would be, there was thrust a long blackheaded pin!

It would be quite impossible to attempt to describe the feelings that overcame me as I stared down at the little figure in my hand. I had wanted and prayed for proof—and here it was! Proof final and undeniable that the woman I had married was a witch, and that she had used one of the accepted forms of black magic in order to encompass the death of my poor father. . . .

As I stared at the figure in its maroon-coloured coat, with the ring of dark hair about the base of the scalp and the short pointed beard that was so typical of my father, I felt a dozen warring emotions fighting within my breast. I knew that for months past now I had known the truth, but refused to recognize it—partly because my sophisticated mentality, as a modern young man, fought against accepting the idea that the sinister beliefs—and practices—of an older day were not dead, but very much alive indeed; and partly out of a sort of belated loyalty to Gilda, the Gilda I had first known and loved, or thought I loved. I knew only too well now, by painful experience, that *that* Gilda, compound in my besotted mind of every charm and virtue imaginable in a woman, had never existed except in my fervid imagination, stimulated by infatuation; and yet something in me fought hard—and up to date, successfully—against the idea that she was . . . well, what she truly was.

Now I knew, and there was no sense in trying to deceive myself—indeed, to do that would be to lay myself open to

trouble, as the only safety for me lay in facing the truth. Here in my hand lay the proof that Gilda was a witch to her bone and marrow, and would always be! Had been, I guessed, in many earlier lives. I had always had a sneaking interest in the ancient doctrine of reincarnation, and could not but recollect that in the second dream of mine, where I sensed rather than saw a great gathering of people somewhere in the open air—in a forested glade, I thought—when I heard Gilda, the Gilda I knew, yet a Gilda I did not know, answer an interrogation from a grim and terrible Voice! Somehow I felt that this dream had taken me back to a scene that had actually happened some time in the Middle Ages and, I thought, in France . . . but I pulled myself together fiercely, for this was no time to let myself go wandering down vague avenues of speculation. Gilda might be returning any moment, and if she found me with this clay puppet in my hand. . . .

I flinched away from the thought, wrapped the puppet carefully in a piece of tissue paper, thrust it into my pocket and left the room, closing the door carefully behind me.

I went direct to the telephone—somehow I must find Chloris, I knew, and for the time being, at least, avoid meeting Gilda. For I was afraid if I met her in the mood I was in then, that I would find it hard to prevent myself doing or saying something that would warn her that I knew what she had so carefully tried to hide from me—indeed, in the black fury I was in at the moment, I would have taken the greatest pleasure in seizing her by the throat and throttling the evil life out of her! I realized that for a time at least I must give myself a chance to recover from the shock, and pull myself together before I met her. As I took up the telephone, the drawing-room door was open and I saw through the chink that Irina, who had had her supper with Maria in the kitchen, had evidently finished her supper and was going up the stairs. I called out to her.

"Irina! Would you please put out the small brown leather suitcase that I use for short visits in my bedroom? I shall be packing a few things, as I have an urgent call to go to the

Midlands and must leave tonight, the minute I've made this telephone call. So please tell your mistress I've been called away on business and may be away a few days. Say I'll telephone her when I shall be returning."

Irina nodded and went on up the stairs, and within a few moments I heard Chloris' dear voice on the telephone.

"Hullo Keith? You sound upset, somehow? What's happened?"

"I want to tell you about it," I said carefully—for it might be that Irina, or Maria, both of whom spoke English, were listening, and I had no desire for my movements that night to appear other than what I had already described! "I have to catch a train after dinner to the Midlands—I've got to go north on urgent business, but I *must* see you before. It's important."

"I see," said Chloris. "In that case, you'd better come here and have some food with me—I shall be alone, as mother is in bed with a slight chill. Come right along and spill the beans!"

"I'll come," I said thankfully. "Give me half an hour—I must pack a few things into a suitcase that I'll bring with me. So long, bless you!"

As the taxi rolled me along about twenty minutes later I sent up my mental thanks for the lucky chance that Aunt Mary was in bed so that Chloris and I would be alone; and when I went into the Ionides' flat and Chloris, her charming face bearing a faint frown of concern, opened the door to me, I sent up another—a prayer of thanks that I had in Chloris a sure haven of refuge from the storms and stresses of my life with Gilda! I set down my suitcase and she raised her brows—we were so closely *en rapport* that increasingly often I found her echoing my thoughts before they were really formulated. I nodded, looking at the suitcase as I doffed my hat and coat.

"You're right, it's camouflage," I said briefly. "I'm not going anywhere, actually—but I *had* to get out of the flat until I'd got my balance back. I've been knocked clean off

it! Give me a strong drink, my dear, and take one yourself—you'll need it!"

She nodded, and I followed her into the drawing-room. Here without a word she poured me out a strong whisky and soda and a sherry for herself, and indicated the seat beside her on the sofa beside the fire.

Sitting down I drank off a good half of my whisky and set the glass down with a sigh of relief.

"Chloris," I said, "I'm running away—for the time being at least. I've reached a stage where I simply can't meet Gilda until I've got myself completely in hand again!" Chloris looked at me steadily.

"I think you are wise," she said. "And you want to tell me what caused this! But you'll have to keep it now until after dinner's served because Rena will be in and out. I can see that it's something serious and to do with Gilda. How long are you going to stay away from her?"

"At least for several days," I said. "Luckily Gilda was out when I returned from the office and I found—well, I'll tell you what I found later. I told Irina to tell Gilda I had to rush up to the Midlands to see a special sale there where I might pick up some good things, and I packed a bag and here I am." Chloris got up and, going over to a low carved Canterbury that held an array of magazines, fished one out and, coming back, held it out to me.

"Here's where I'm going to be very useful to you," she said. "Haven't you seen the advertisement of Lord Perrott's collection in here? I've heard you and your father mention him as a discerning collector who had some good stuff, and apparently he's decided to get rid of some of his things."

It was a copy of the antique dealer's favourite journal, the *Collector*, and I am ashamed to say I had been so busy that month with my personal troubles that I had not bothered to glance at the new number which she handed to me; and there, sure enough, on one of the inner pages was the announcement that Lord Perrott, the wellknown collector, had decided to sell some of his treasures. Anybody interested was advised

to pay a visit to Harlsden Manor, Perrott's place in Staffordshire, without delay, as his taste was wellknown and there was bound to be a rush. I put down the paper with a sigh of relief.

"That's solved my problem—thanks to you—and it's in the Midlands too, by luck!" I said. "I can drop Gilda a card from Harlsden when I am there, and that will prevent her asking any awkward questions. I'll sleep tonight at the Club and catch an early train tomorrow up to Staffordshire."

At that moment Rena announced dinner, which, Chloris said, she insisted on serving in the usual way, although Aunt Mary was ill in bed, and very good it was; onion soup, which I loved, though Gilda always swore it was a vulgar taste; spaghetti with Bolognese sauce, made as only Rena could make it, and a mushroom soufflé to top up with. And afterwards, settled comfortably in the drawing-room, Chloris having paid her stepmother a brief visit to see that she was all right, we sat facing each other on the sofa.

I drank my coffee and the tiny glass of green ouzo that accompanied it—the Ionides, naturally, liked Greek drinks and always had a bottle of ouzo, the resin-flavoured liqueur, on hand, and I had learned to like it in Greece—and spoke decisively.

"Chloris, you remember how often we have discussed the possibility of Gilda's being a witch?"

Chloris nodded without speaking, her eyes on mine, and pushing my hand into my pocket, I fished out the little packet I had carried since my tragic discovery of it. It was now carefully wrapped in a clean handkerchief, and as I unrolled it and held it out, I felt again a wave sweep over me of the blind fury I had felt when I first saw it. My dear old father, so kind, so gentle, so wise, so patient with my youthful cranks and stupidities and extravagances! The wave passed, leaving me with a sense of unutterable sadness, and Chloris, as she saw and recognized what I was showing her, put her hands to her mouth, grew white and uttered a wordless cry.

"Oh, oh!" There was a pause, and she spoke, her horrified gaze riveted on the puppet in my hand. "Keith, I can't believe it! And yet, there's the proof! She killed him, in the ancient traditional way. . . ."

"And if killing her in return," I said savagely, "would do any good I'd strangle her, the fiend, with my bare hands! But . . . that would only satisfy my personal hate of her, and nothing else."

"And you mustn't let your hate of her make you act without thinking," said Chloris hastily. "Because she holds the safety of Noel in her hands—and that's why you can't either show her you know, nor leave her, or she would take it out on Noel!"

"I know," I said grimly. "But listen while I tell you how I found this." Rising, she poured both of us out another dose of ouzo—and I'll bet she needed it as much as I did!—and when she sat down, I told her the story of how I had been hunting for Isolda Lesandos' address and found it, at least found that Gilda knew her telephone number. Then how I had, by sheer accident, found the clay figure of my father, which she had evidently thrown into the corner, thinking it would fall as usual into the wastepaper basket always kept there—and Chloris listened in silence, only nodding now and then, but never once taking her blue eyes from mine as she listened. When I had finished she spoke reflectively.

"I know she has a friend called Isolda," she said, "though I've never met her, and I don't think she comes to your place. I think Gilda goes to hers. At least, I remember, after your last cocktail-party, Aunt Mary and I were the last to leave. I'd said good-bye and you were trying to get a taxi for Aunt Mary, and I'd found I'd forgotten my gloves and went back to the drawing-room to get them—I remembered I'd put them on the piano. I stepped in softly, as Gilda was telephoning—her back was to me, and I heard her talking to somebody she called 'Isolda', I remember the name, as it's rather an unusual one. She was discussing some meeting or other that she was going to at Isolda's flat. . . ."

"Probably one of these damn Black Magic evenings she goes to regularly," I said, and Chloris went on.

"Well, anyway, I heard her say 'Isolda' two or three times, but nothing else of importance, and in any case I wasn't waiting. I picked up my gloves and crept away without Gilda's ever knowing I'd been in the room—as you know, the telephone's at the far end of the room, and her back was towards me."

"Well," I said, "Vronski is right! I went and had a talk with him, you know, though he wasn't much use to me; he only knew Gilda as a girl of nineteen. But he did say that even then, Gilda was a friend of Isolda's, who was the wife of an advanced magician—a White one, though—and that he knew that Isolda was running a secret group of her own that was anything but white, and that Gilda belonged to it!"

"Are you going to destroy the puppet?" Chloris asked.

"Not on your life!" I said grimly. "I'm keeping it so that one of these days, when I feel it's safe to defy Gilda, I'm going to confront her with it! Because however cleverly she may try to deny it, it's a solid proof that she is a witch and that she used witchcraft to destroy my father!"

I re-wrapped the pitiful little object in my handkerchief and thrust it into my pocket, and Chloris rose to her feet.

"All right—but don't do that until you're sure that nobody is in danger from her. And yet. . . ." suddenly her soft arm went round my shoulders and she pressed her cheek to mine bent towards her. "Oh, Keith, I love you so much that even while I realize that you are the last person she is likely to hurt, I still fear for you! And tonight, seeing that horrible tangible proof of her evil powers—my fears are shaking me terribly! Thank heaven you're getting away from her for at least a few days!"

At her touch everything else went out of my head, my lips found hers, and for a few minutes we clung to each other in passionate silence, heart beating on heart, lips together as though nothing could ever part them again—and then, softly

but firmly, Chloris pushed me away from her. She laughed tremulously as she did so.

"Yes, I invited that, I know, and I shouldn't have done so! It only makes it worse having to keep you at arm's length, as I must do, if I stick to my principles as I mean to do!"

"I only wish," I said thickly, for I was still quivering with the passion she had awakened in me. "I only wish you'd let me make love to you properly! There are times when——" but she laid a perfumed hand quickly on my lips to silence me.

"Don't say it!" she said. "Do you think that I don't wish the same sometimes? Of course I do! I'm a normal woman, and young, and you are my man and I love you, and I want nothing more intensely than to give myself to you! But not now, Keith, and maybe never, unless we can marry and be together for always. And whether Gilda would ever permit that, only God knows—and He won't tell! Now get your things on and take your bag, my dear, and go to the Club—and tomorrow take an early train to Harlsden, and good luck to you. I hope you find some lovely things in the Perrott collection."

I 2

The Truth Comes Out

MANY times during the ensuing week did I thank Chloris for her interest in the *Collector*—an interest that had, of course, developed through her contact with my father and me—that had led her to notice the advertisement of Lord Perrott's sale; I would probably, sunk in the slough of my own troubles, not have bothered to look at it, though that very copy containing the advertisement was at that moment lying on the table in my drawing-room.

My visit to Staffordshire proved more than worthwhile, for I bought a number of covetable pieces, furniture and glass and china, for Bury Street; and Lord Perrott, whom I had met several times in London when he came to Bury Street—he had known my father for many years—was charming to me. Once he invited me to lunch with his family—they occupied only one wing of Harlsden Manor, which was far too big for any modern family to live in unless they were millionaires—and again to dinner, along with old Paul Bristowe; which was a great compliment to me, as Paul was one of the world-famous experts in antiques, while I was still one of the very much younger set. I was much flattered at this, and even more at Bristowe's attitude to me, which was more than kind and encouraging; so one way and another, the week kept my mind well away from the terrible problem of Gilda and what to do about her; so that by the time I travelled down to London once more and took a taxi from the station to my home,

I was at least thoroughly in control of myself once more and ready for anything that I might have to face.

Yet the hardest thing I ever did in my life was to sit that night opposite Gilda at dinner, and listen and respond to her talking! Luckily she was full of talk, having met that afternoon, at a friend's house, the representative of a wealthy and prominent Manchester firm who, she thought, would be willing to consider arranging for her to have an Exhibition of her ceramic work in Manchester one day later on in the year, when her London Show should be over. The friend she was visiting had several of Gilda's best pieces in her possession, and the little man had been very much impressed.

When he left he had expressed his full intention of pressing his employers to arrange a show at their large gallery in Manchester; so Gilda was in high spirits, and I doubt whether she even noticed how little I myself talked. . . . Though she may, indeed, have grown accustomed to my comparative silence, as since my suspicions about her had first awakened I had grown increasingly ill-at-ease with her, and found making ordinary conversation—which I tried hard to do whenever Maria or others were in the room, lest the suspicion arise that my wife and I didn't "get on"—more and more difficult.

I was thankful that that night there was a T.V. show on of an opera we both liked, so that there was no need to try and keep up any conversation after dinner; and I was even more thankful when the end of the show came and Gilda, picking up her cigarette case and her lighter, rose to her feet and announced her intention of going to bed. I nodded and bade her good night—we had long abandoned the casual touch on the cheek that passes as a good night kiss for so many married couples. She left the room and I heard her light steps ascending the stairs to the bedroom above.

A short time passed, and I was idly watching a sports programme that didn't interest me, and wondering whether I could possibly summon up sufficient independence of mind to try and read a book, when there was the sound of a shrill

scream from above and a thud, and I sprang to my feet. What on earth had happened? Within a moment I was running up the stairs, and as I reached the landing I saw that Irina, Noel's nurse, who had gone to bed, had plainly been awakened by the screams and had, like me, come out to see what had happened.

Her wide scared eyes met mine, and I remember realizing what a young thing she still was, despite her nursing training, with her fair hair in twin plaits, and her thin young neck rising from the collar of her blue dressing-gown.

"It's Madame," she whispered. "What has happened to her? *Dio mio*, what a shriek!"

As she was talking we both made for Gilda's room out of which, as you know, the smaller room, originally the dressing-room, but now my permanent bedroom, led. Gilda had plainly begun to undress, for her frock lay across a chair and her shoes had been kicked off—but she lay unconscious close to the door of the dressing-room; and remembering what Chloris had placed above the door there, I had no need to inquire what had happened! For some reason Gilda had wanted something out of my room, so she had tried to pass under the iron rod; and its power, inimical to all witches, had struck her down.

Here, if I needed it, was fresh proof! Without a word Irina and I lifted her, carried her to the bed and laid her down upon it, and while I spread the coverlet over her, Irina went about the room picking up the discarded frock and shoes. But even as I drew up the coverlet I saw Gilda's eyes open and fix themselves on me. They rested there for a moment, and then she realized the presence of Irina in the room and called out her name sharply. I moved to leave her, meaning to go and get a glass of brandy, for she looked terribly white; but she clutched the sleeve of my coat and clung fiercely to it as she called again.

"Irina! Drop what you're doing and come here!"

With open mouth the girl put down the shoes she had just picked up and approached the bed as Gilda spoke again.

"Irina! Go and feel under the carpet in the doorway of the dressing-room and see if you can find anything hidden there?"

Still gaping, the girl obeyed, while I stared down at my wife, suddenly beginning to realize that she suspected the truth—and when Irina, after fumbling on the floor for a moment, declared that there was nothing under the carpet, Gilda snapped out.

"Then look over the door—quick! Along the lintel!" And before I could draw a breath Irina reached up—she was a tall girl—on tiptoe and touched something lying along the lintel that fell with a clatter at her feet. It was the iron rod!

I stood frozen into immobility as Irina stooped to pick it up and made to approach the bed; but Gilda cried out loudly.

"Don't come near me—don't, I tell you! Take that thing downstairs and throw it away—into the dustbin, out into the road, I don't care where—but get rid of it, d'you hear?"

The urgency in her voice was patent, and Irina, plainly now badly frightened, fled away through the dressing-room door carrying the iron rod—and Gilda, releasing her hold on my sleeve, sat up, swung her legs on to the ground and stood upright, facing me. I stood rigid, and set my teeth. Best have it out now, since events had forced my hand!

For a moment we stood facing each other in silence and then Gilda gave a bitter laugh of mockery.

"Who gave you the idea of trying to bar the witch from your room, my handsome young husband?" she said. "I'd have found it out long ago had I felt sufficiently drawn to you to want to come into your room, but I didn't. It's a long time since I lost interest in you as a lover."

"It's of no importance how the rod got up there," I said steadily. "Maybe I put it there myself. I've been reading up a lot about you and your kind these past months, and I know it would be a barrier you couldn't cross." She shrugged her shoulders and moved across the room.

"Cold iron—cold iron and running water," she muttered. "Both barriers to us, and always have been! So you know what I am?"

"Yes," I said steadily.

Putting my hand into my pocket, I fished out the little packet containing the puppet figure of my father, unwrapped it from the paper around it and held it out in the palm of my hand.

"I've suspected for a long time that you were a witch," I said, "and here is the proof of it! I found it a week ago near the wastepaper basket in your workroom. Are you going to try and deny that you did this? Made a clay puppet of my father and then stuck pins into it through his heart so as gradually to kill him?" As she was silent I went on. "I've known, of course, for ages that you wanted him dead so that the business came into my hands—and here is the proof that you succeeded. You killed him—you fiend in human form!"

Gilda looked at the little figure in my hand for a moment without speaking—then she shrugged her shoulders and looked me in the eyes; and so help me God, I blanched, for I never saw in any other human creatures eyes the sheer evil that flamed in hers! But then, again, she wasn't human . . . not as we understand humanity, at least. . . .

"So you found that!" she commented. "Serves me right for not clearing out my wastepaper basket myself—I suppose Irina didn't do it thoroughly. Yes, of course it's true! I married you because I wanted a well-to-do English husband—I could have married again in Milan, but there had been talk when Quarenghi died, and I was not popular. They know more in Italy than you bovine English do about witchcraft, and they suspected me; so I knew it was better to go to another country to find a second husband."

"Did you kill Quarenghi," I asked, "and your father too, *and* that woman your father planned to marry? I found in your drawer those envelopes with hair and nail parings, and that black notebook too. . . ."

Gilda smiled.

"I don't have to answer your questions," she said regally. "Let the past hold its own secrets! But as you found that clay

figurine, I'll admit that I used my ancient knowledge to get rid of your father, and I did it for the reason you guessed. I want to be rich—*really* rich—and with your father out of the way, I can be! That business of yours is booming, and if you will only listen to me it can be extended. . . .”

“I'll listen to you about nothing,” I cried. “You're an evil woman and I hate and dread you, and if it wasn't for. . . .”

“I know,” said Gilda. “If it wasn't for Noel! Don't ever forget, my so-clever Keith, that if you should be such a fool as to try and leave me and take the child with you—which I know is in your mind—that I have taken the precaution of keeping snippings of Noel's hair and nails, also of yours! And though I should not kill *you*, since it is from you that I must get most of the money I need and mean to have, don't forget than I can do you harm—and how would you like to be afflicted with some loathsome skin-disease the doctors couldn't cure? And don't forget either, that if you leave me and take Noel with you, I'm perfectly capable of striking at him wherever he may be, no matter how far away! And,” she went on relishingly, enjoying the sight of my stricken face “make no mistake, I should enjoy it! How would you enjoy seeing Noel suddenly crippled by some awful bone trouble—or losing his sight, or the power of speech that he's only just developing?”

“You are a heartless, bloodless fiend,” I said hoarsely, “and. . . .”

Gilda laughed.

“Do you expect sloppy songs of earthly mother-love from a witch?” she demanded. “Let me tell you, Keith, I come of a long line of witches, and I'm proud of it—followers of our Lord Lucifer, in Whose Hand lies the earth and all that pertains to it! You can worship that bloodless Saviour of yours if you like, and look forward to going to that bread-and-butter heaven after you've denied yourself every exciting and amusing activity possible on earth! I prefer my own God, Who has given me in countless lives past what He always promises his followers. Riches and power enough to get them

all the wonderful things they want on earth—and He will see that I get them in this life, if I do His Will!”

But I felt I could stand no more. Blindly I turned towards the door, averting my eyes from the face of the woman who recited the damned creed in which it was plain she entirely believed, and she laughed again, the harsh mocking laugh of a devil from hell. But before I left I had something else to say.

“Listen to me!” I said hoarsely. “It’s true that because of what you might do to Noel, I *can’t* leave you and take him with me, or by God, I would go tomorrow! But this at least I can do. You will tell Irina tomorrow that because he is getting to a restless age and disturbs you, you will not have him left in your bedroom tomorrow afternoon, or at all in the future—I know what goes on when he is alone with you then, and don’t expect me to tell you how I know, for I will not! But unless you do this—and if at any time harm comes to Noel that I can trace back to you—then I swear I shall cut down your allowance by at least half; and moreover, I shall refuse to pay the rent of the gallery here in London, *and* the Manchester gallery too that is proposing to show your things in the spring.” Now for the moment at least she was impressed, as I had expected. With her passion for money, this was the only threat that had the least power to move her. I waited by the door for a long moment, and then, turning with a shrug of her shoulders, she snapped out an answer.

“Very well—I can do without the damned brat now! I’ve got plenty out of him—and there are other ways. And now go! Go and tell all this to that milkfaced Chloris of yours! Dear me, do you imagine I don’t know what’s been happening between you? I always carry my crystal ball with me when I travel, and in it I’ve watched you time and again when you’ve been with her—dancing, dining, making sheep’s eyes at each other!” I whirled round on my heels and spoke thickly.

“Chloris is the only decent influence in my life now my father’s gone!” I said. “And if you dare harm a hair of her head I swear I’ll strangle you, Gilda—I swear it!”

She shrugged her shoulders again and laughed contemptuously.

"Harm her—why should I? She keeps you occupied and out of my way, and that suits me all right—and do you imagine that if you go to bed with the silly girl, that it will disturb me?"

"I don't," I snarled. "Chloris is what you and your kind will never understand—she's a good girl. . . ."

"You can go play with her, in bed or out, all you want," said Gilda, "and as long as she doesn't interfere with my plans she will be safe. Otherwise. . . ."

I 3

The Second Death

I HAD hoped that my threat of cutting down the supplies of money on which Gilda had counted so much would bring her more or less to heel; and certainly, for several weeks after the scene between us described in the last chapter, in which at long last the truth lay naked and undisguised between us, she behaved with great discretion. Visited Noel more often than usual; went out of her way to be amiable to me, went out but little, except for her evening "breather" in her car, and worked hard at preparing new models for her show.

I had told her bluntly that the less I saw of her the better; but for the sake of appearances, we *had*, some nights in the week, to dine together, though on those occasions I tried to have somebody else come to dine, as I found it the hardest thing in the world now to sit tête-a-tête with my wife, making ordinary conversation with her, for the sake of Maria and Irina! Yet sometimes this had to be done, for the last thing I wanted was an obvious break that would cause talk; and knowing how servants gossip one with another, we had to keep up the conventional attitude of a reasonably happy couple before them, at least.

One thing for which I was thankful was that Gilda obeyed me in dropping the habit of Noel's having his afternoon sleep in her room while she had hers—or was supposed to have it. She told Irina that now Noel was growing older he burbled

and whimpered or cried out sometimes in his sleep, and this disturbed her; so she had decided to let Maria have charge of the baby during the two hours that Irina took off every afternoon. Maria, who adored the baby, was delighted at the idea; and now, on her way out every afternoon, Irina would bring down Noel's carry-cot, put it beside the kitchen fire opposite the comfortable wicker chair in which Maria would sit knitting, deposit Noel safely in the cot, tuck him up, and go out; and seeing this, I was satisfied. How could I have dreamt of the dire result of my plan for the child's safety?

Chloris, to whom of course I recounted the painful scene when the rod was discovered, was deeply sympathetic, but agreed with me that I had done all I could and must now simply sit back and await events—always the most difficult thing to do! She rejoiced that the afternoon arrangements concerning the baby had been altered, and, like me, felt the worst danger to Noel was now past and over—how bitterly wrong we both were!

Since now Gilda knew all about our feelings for each other and apparently did not care one way or the other, Chloris and I saw no reason why we should not meet for dinner now and then; and even go dancing, though this had to be carefully rationed, as though Gilda did not care a button for me, she was exceedingly jealous of her prerogative as a wife. For me to be seen too often escorting a pretty girl would inevitably have given rise to the usual gossip, which she would resent; and I feared lest her resentment might be "taken out" on Chloris, in some unpleasant way. I knew that my beloved was well protected; but by this time I had good reason to fear the evil powers of the woman I had married, and I dreaded the possibility of these being brought into play against Chloris. Gilda did not want me herself; but she would strongly object to the world at large seeing me apparently attached to the heels of another woman, since this would reflect upon her own powers as a woman—and this her vanity would never endure!

So Chloris and I limited ourselves very severely as regards

dancing, dining etc., in places where Gilda's fashionable friends were likely to foregather, and when we went out together chose small and unfashionable places—and so for some weeks life went on. You couldn't call it smoothly, speaking mentally at least, for whenever I was with Gilda I was conscious of being ever on guard, alert for danger of some sort—though I couldn't possibly have said what; and under cover of the bright, brittle manner that she sedulously kept up, I knew she was watching me with the sharp intentness of a crouching cat. But somehow we kept up appearances before the eyes of the world at least; and luckily I was extremely busy then, as my father's death had brought a shower of letters, telegrams, orders and even visits from colleagues of his all over the world; and while I was intensely proud of this proof of the respect and admiration in which he was held in his chosen profession, I was deeply anxious to show myself at least a reasonably worthy successor to him, as I was the product of his training and had spent my life in his shadow. I'm glad to say that apparently I succeeded in this, and many new orders and even new clients came the way of "Randolph & Son"; and I visualized the happy time, far in the future, when Noel would be old enough to be trained by me as I had been trained by my father, and the name above the door of our shop in Bury Street, "Randolph & Son" would once again have its true meaning.

So one way and another, life went on, and I was thankful to see that Noel was regaining his old colour and energy—when one night I had yet another dream!

Nowadays I kept the door between the dressing-room where I slept and Gilda's room permanently locked—not that I thought she would ever be likely to come in, as these days it was plain that she wanted to see me as little as I wanted to see her; just enough to keep up appearances in the social world, that was all. But somehow I felt happier with the door locked, so that I couldn't even hear her moving about or smell the strong Eastern perfume she used; and one night I had returned from the office not only very tired, but with the be-

ginnings of a nasty cold on me, and had gone up to bed early, only to find myself awake in the early hours of the morning, sweating with fear and shaking from head to foot!

I had found myself once more standing somewhere in a copse of tall trees. I could smell the faint scent of grass and pine trees and other wild things, and I could see, between the branches that arched over my head, glimpses of a dark-blue night sky sprinkled thickly with stars. I was not alone, for I could hear and sense round me the stealthy movement of many people, though I could see nothing more definite than an occasional dark cloaked and hooded figure—and I am now glad that the sight of That Which Spoke was hidden from me.

But I could hear what It said clearly enough.

It said. "Daughter, do you hear me?" And lo, in return I heard the voice of Gilda! Again, where she was I do not know—but her voice was there, replying to That Which Spoke.

"I hear you, Master, and I know what you would say to me." The Voice spoke, and I shuddered at its grim ruthlessness.

"The sacrifice is still delayed, daughter, and already we have waited overlong."

"I know, Master," said Gilda submissively. "I would have brought it to you before, as I promised, but in the earth-life I am forced to lead, there are difficulties . . . I have dealt death to the older Randolph, at least."

The Voice interrupted, and in it there was a note of sharp contempt.

"What use was that to Me? He was what the foolish world calls a good man, so that on death he went to the Enemy's camp, and there he abides, and neither I or my legions can hope to reach him! But I still await, and I *demand*, the sacrifice you ought to have made so many centuries ago, and must make now in compensation for your failure then. . . ."

"I know Master, I know." Gilda's voice was shaky but determined.

"I swear to you, by the faith in You that my fathers held and to which, as you know, I cling, that the sacrifice *shall* be duly made—and soon!" Then there arose a distant thunderous sound like the exulting cry of a myriad voices, gloating, triumphing, that so frightened me that I awoke sharply and, as I said, found myself sweating and shaking in sheer terror.

I told myself it was only another nightmare of the sort I'd had before; but that was little comfort, and besides I had a nasty hunch that somehow it *wasn't* entirely a dream—though if it *wasn't*, I couldn't give any explanation as to what it might be.

I got up and poured myself a drink from the little corner cupboard in which I kept a small supply of drinks mingled with odd medicines such as aspirin, cough mixture, stomach tablets and so on, and at last got off to sleep again.

But next day I was preoccupied and worried, couldn't get the memory of the thing out of my mind; also this cold was bothering me, and as towards the end of the morning I was running a temperature, I decided to go home and if things got worse, to send for Dr. Barton.

Needless to say, the last thing I wanted to do was to spend the day at home, as that would mean lunching with Gilda; but luckily I found that she was lunching out. So I had my meal alone, saw Irina bring Noel's cot down and put it in the kitchen, settle Noel cosily in it and then go blithely out, just as Gilda came back. Hearing her key in the lock, I had hastily retreated into the drawing-room where, I had told her on the telephone, I should probably spend the rest of the day working with my secretary after lunch, and taking large doses of the medicine that Dr. Barton had prescribed for my cold.

Peeping through the chink of the drawing-room door as I held it an inch or so ajar, I saw Gilda greet Irina briefly, shut the front door behind her as the girl went out, and then stand still for a moment or two, her eyes fixed on the black shape of Satan, her cat, who was stealing down the staircase

to greet her, as he always did. Then she went softly to the kitchen door; peeping inside it, she then turned and picked up Satan, who was close on her heels, and holding him in her arms, whispered something, or seemed to, into his ear. Then she put him down and he disappeared into the kitchen. She stood for a moment watching where he had vanished round the door and then, smiling a little satisfied smile, turned and ascended the stairs to her room. I watched her, feeling puzzled. As a rule she and Satan were virtually inseparable, and he always slept at the foot of her bed while she took her siesta; and I wondered why, on this occasion, for some reason she had chosen to send him into the kitchen?

Looking back at that moment, I marvel that I did not suspect her evil design. But I only felt rather puzzled, dismissed the thing as another of Gilda's vagaries, and betook myself to the sofa where I pulled a rug over myself and settled down to sleep until Miss Burton came at four o'clock. I had told her not to come until then, as Dr. Barton, who had given me a medicine that contained, among other things, something to keep my nerves quiet, and told me that a long sleep after lunch would do me good. He said that I was far too nervy, and he supposed it was the worry and shock of my father's death. I had to suppress a wry grin, thinking how he would stare did I ever tell him the real reason for my nerviness!

I slept for a couple of hours, and then woke to the sound of a ringing scream! It was Irina, just returned from her afternoon's walk—I sprang from the sofa and rushed into the hall to see the girl clinging to the handle of the kitchen door in shaking hysterics. All I could make out were screams of "the baby, the baby!" and something about a cat—and when I rushed into the kitchen I saw Maria, grey-faced with horror, staring as though transfixed down at the carrycot, which was on the floor of the kitchen opposite to the chair in which she had been sitting—and there, curled in a black heap, flat on the face of my little son, was Satan!

I pounced to seize the brute, but he was too quick for

me—I would have strangled him, the black devil, with my bare hands had I got hold of him—but he was gone like a flash, past me and out of the door, as I lifted from the cot the body of my child! Dead! Suffocated by that fiendish cat Satan! As Vronski had foretold, the second death was here. . . .

By this time Maria, thoroughly awake and realizing that it was because of her falling asleep that the child was dead, had added her shrieks and wails to Irina's, and I rushed out into the hall, the baby in my arms, and bawled wildly for Gilda to come down. But the noise had already awakened her, and she came to the top of the short flight of stairs that led from the drawing-room floor up to the bedroom floor; and seeing me standing there with Noel in my arms, she stopped stock still, one hand on the balustrade, and stared down at me.

Just what I said I don't know, I was too distraught, but something about the cat and our baby, and with her eyes still fast on me, she came slowly down the stairs. As she came down Maria rushed out of the kitchen, and seizing her arm, began to pour out a torrent of excited Italian, explaining, protesting, imploring forgiveness, mingled with hysterical blubbering, and Gilda, pushing her aside, came over to me and stood looking down at the dead child in my arms. She did not attempt to touch it, but her face and her lips were set hard and in her green eyes there was a strange light. . . .

"What is this hysterical fool bawling about?" she said abruptly.

"Noel is dead," I said, "suffocated by that infernal cat of yours! Maria had charge of Noel in the kitchen, he was sleeping there in his cot, and she fell asleep—and Satan crept in and curled up on his face, and when Irina came in she found him dead! But wait . . ." a sudden wild hope seized me. "There may be time yet. . . ."

Rushing into the kitchen I pushed aside Irina, who was sitting at the table with her head in her hands, now weeping wildly, I laid the limp body of the little son I loved on the

table and tried to revive him with the kiss of life—but though I worked on him for over ten minutes, it was hopeless! There was no sign of returning life, and at last I stood upright again, realizing that I was merely wasting my time, and spoke dully. I realized that there was silence around me now. Both the maids had gone, and Gilda stood by the door watching me.

"It's no good," I said. "He's gone—dead! Do you realize, Gilda, that our son—the little boy who was our great hope for the future—has been killed by that bloody cat of yours? My God, if I can only catch him. . . ."

"If you catch him, I give you permission to kill him in any way you please," said Gilda calmly. "But where he is I don't know—and in any case, the poor creature only followed his instinct to go and curl up in a place that was warm and comfortable. . . ."

I fairly howled at her.

"God in heaven, can you try to make excuses for the brute? If you can do that, with the body of your child lying dead before you through that cat, you—you not only aren't a mother, you're scarcely a woman, even!"

Not even then did it occur to me to connect her whisper to Satan in the hall, as she held him in her arms, and his disappearance into the kitchen, with the pitiful limp shape on the table, lying white as wax in a tangle of blankets! Perhaps it was as well I did not, as in my frantic grief and rage I might well have tried to wreak that rage upon her as I would have wreaked it on Satan, had I caught him. But she laid a cold hand—cold as ice it was, but steely-strong as her glance that met and held my eyes—on my arm, and spoke with a voice as cold.

"You're getting hysterical too, Keith—and what is the use of that? This is a truly terrible thing, I agree. I feel it deeply, though to show my feelings outwardly has never been my way. It is all the fault of Maria, who slept in her chair instead of keeping watch over the child as she was supposed to do. Tomorrow I shall give her a month's notice. I would

send her packing today—but maids who are good cooks are not easy to get. . . .”

“I don’t care if they are not!” I said hoarsely. “Maria goes tomorrow, if I have to throw her out myself—and if you won’t do the cooking until you can find another maid, we’ll eat out. I won’t have that woman one hour longer under my roof than I can help!”

Gilda gave a faint shrug of her shoulders.

“As you will, Keith—though I suppose it doesn’t strike you that in that case a lot of housework will fall upon my shoulders just at a time when I am least fitted to shoulder it . . . and it may be some time before I can find another suitable maid. There will be poor Noel’s funeral to arrange for, as well as the work I must do for new models for my Show. . . .”

But this was more than I could stand. Turning on my heel, I snarled at her over my shoulder.

“Damn it, you aren’t human, Gilda! Here is your child lying dead before you, and all you can talk about is your Show and the difficulty of getting maids! Things have been getting thin between us for months past, and now this is the end. I’m doing the arranging about Noel, since you never cared a damn for him, and I did—and now I’m going to ring up the doctor.”

The papers, of course, went to town on the story, and headlines about “Tragedy of young antique expert’s child”, “Baby suffocated by cat”, “Cat kills Child” and so on, were splashed on every newsheet. Reporters swarmed all over the place, and there was a general demand for Satan, whom the papers wanted to photograph; but luckily for him he could not be found, as I should certainly have killed him had he been caught. We were showered with letters, telegrams, telephone-calls of sympathy from all sorts of people, strangers as well as friends, and I seemed to go through my days in a dream until the body of my little son was cremated as my father’s had been.

All through, Gilda, consummate actress as she was, conducted herself, from the outward point of view at least, precisely as a bereaved mother should, looking pale and picturesque in drooping black and saying all the things that a mother in that position was expected to say; but I knew very well that there was no meaning whatever behind what she said! I never saw her shed a single tear, though at the cremation service, and especially afterwards, when we went to see the colourful litter of flowers wreaths, sheaves, crosses and the like that had been sent by kindly friends, I noticed that she made great play with an embroidered and scented handkerchief . . . and the reporters spoke admiringly of the tragic figure of the desolate mother.

I went through the whole thing like a wooden image, only longing for it to be over so that I could fling myself headlong into my work and try to forget the chubby, laughing little soul who for only just over a year had meant so much in my life.

But life had not finished dealing me dire blows—not yet!

Less than a week had passed since the cremation, and in a measure I had begun to settle down a little. Maria had gone, and Irina too, and in her usual amazing way Gilda had managed to find another cook, a fat, bovine Russian woman; also a daily woman to help her, as in these days apparently cooks were rarely willing, as in older times, to do much about the house outside their usual cooking and care of the kitchen. I was going about my business dully, but so far more or less efficiently, and as usual, Chloris had proved a tower of strength.

Both she and Aunt Mary had been inexpressibly shocked at Noel's tragic death—but as Aunt Mary said, Maria had been at fault to go to sleep instead of keeping watch, and children had been killed in that way before. Which was why no baby should be left sleeping in a pram or cot, or anywhere, unless something—a piece of net or veiling of some sort—was so arranged as to prevent any cat from coming near. . . .

I had flown to Chloris, needless to say, for help and com-

fort the moment things were over, and it was thanks to her steadying influence that somehow I managed to take up my work again more or less successfully—but this was not for long. I had a sudden attack of neuralgia one afternoon and decided to leave the office and go home—I knew I had some Faivre cachets there that had always cured my neuralgia; and on arriving back at the house, was thankful to find that Gilda was out.

I found and took the cachets, and decided to lie down on the drawing-room sofa for awhile until they got to work. When the pain had stilled I meant to go out and dine at my Club and perhaps wander round to Aunt Mary's afterwards—these days I went to great lengths to avoid Gilda, and it was working in my mind that sooner or later I must leave her. My last reason for staying with her had vanished with Noel's death. I didn't think she would care, as long as I went on providing the cash that meant so much to her; but for the moment I was so exhausted by the shock and grief of my double loss that I felt I simply could not face any definite move that would mean a showdown with Gilda.

I shook up the cushions on the sofa and prepared to lie down, then saw that in taking up one of the cushions I had exposed a sheet of letter-paper that had somehow got beneath the cushion; it was a large square of paper scribbled over in a firm handwriting, in Italian, and as I looked at it the signature sprang, as it were, out of the sheet and looked at me. "Isolda"!

So there it was—the proof that the woman Isolda, whom Vronski had suspected of dealing in Black Magic, was a friend of my wife's! Sitting upright, I read the letter—and my heart sank within me as a stone sinks to the bottom of a fathomless well.

It was part, the latter part, of a longer letter, and roughly translated, it read like this.

"... glad that you have at last had the courage to carry out the promise made so many centuries ago. At my Group the other night the Master Himself spoke, and said that you

had made the sacrifice of your child at last and so fulfilled your vow broken so long ago. You are back in His favour once more, and can count on endless worldly successes now that you have done your long-delayed duty. How wonderful of you to have had the deed done by that cat of yours, whom you have so cleverly trained! Now no suspicions can possibly rest on you—and to slip a sleeping draught into your fat cook's after-lunch tea so that she fell asleep, was a master-thought! Yes, I can well imagine the fuss and excitement it must have caused—but now you have the field clear before you, and only that weak fellow you married to handle. You must come to our next meeting, when it is possible the Master Himself might speak and tell you His approval—until then, your friend Isolda.”

Sitting like something frozen, I read and re-read the letter, and reading it wondered why, knowing Gilda's power over Satan as I had reason to do, I had never suspected that in doing this vile deed, Satan had merely been obeying the orders of his mistress. I don't know how long I sat there; I was stunned with sheer horror, I think. All I know is that at last I went to my desk, wrote a brief note to Gilda saying that things were at an end between us. I would continue to provide adequately for her, but I did not wish to see her again. She could explain our parting as she chose to her friends. I did not care what she said—nor what they might say. All I knew was that I could never live with her again. I had decided to go and live in an hotel until I found a suitable bachelor flat; and if she wanted to know the reason, let her read this sheet of paper that had evidently fallen out of her bag or pocket on to the sofa, where I had discovered it!

I stuck the note up where she could not fail to see it; went up to my room, packed a suitcase with things that I should immediately need, and walked out into the night.

I 4

I Break Down

I THOUGHT, when I spoke to the driver of the taxi which I caught a few yards outside my door, that I gave him the address of my Club; but evidently the one thought that was paramount in my mind was Chloris and how to get to her, for when the taxi slowed down and stopped, it was outside the entrance to the old Victorian house in which the Ionides lived!

The man looked round, evidently surprised that I did not get out; but I was so startled and confused that I sat there for a moment staring, bewildered—and just then Chloris, returning from her work at the office, came up and turned to mount the steps. But seeing the halted taxi, she turned to look at it, and saw my face staring at her from inside it—a face (she subsequently said) so deadly white and haggard that she was frightened—she came running to the taxi crying out my name.

As she dragged open the door I tried to speak, but suddenly could not, and everything went black—and when I awoke I found myself in bed in the spare room at the Ionides', with a pair of borrowed pyjamas on, my forehead wet and my feet resting comfortably on a hot-water bottle!

Dear Aunt Mary, recovered from her temporary illness, was bustling about the room and Chloris, sitting on the edge of my bed, was renewing the coldwater bandage on my head. She smiled as I looked up at her and spoke softly.

"Don't worry, Keith, about anything! You fainted in the taxi and the taximan and the hall-porter here managed to get you out and carry you up here, where Aunt Mary and I put you to bed. D'you know, you are running quite a nasty temperature, and I've sent for Dr. Barton?"

I shook my head vaguely. I felt awful, that I knew, and the vague woolly feeling in my head was the worst! I tried to explain and apologize, but they wouldn't let me talk, and in a few moments Dr. Barton arrived and took charge of the situation.

He gave me a strong sedative, and told me to keep quiet and stay in bed; and when I began to protest and murmur about a hospital or Nursing Home, he pooh-poohed it. I couldn't be moved, with the temperature I was running, so for the time being at least I must stay where I was lucky enough to be, and sleep as much as I could, which I soon would do, under the influence of the injection he had just given me . . . and he was right. Almost before he left the room I was asleep, and slept for all of twenty-four hours; which, the doctor said afterwards, probably saved my brain from a serious collapse, as the deaths of my father and my child coming so close together, and the last in so peculiarly horrible a fashion, had dealt me a shock that had gone close to causing me a real mental breakdown.

In any case, I was really ill for some time with what in Victorian days would have been termed brain fever; and I suppose that it was understandable enough, having regard to what I had been through in the shape of nervous strain and shock during the past year. The kindness of those two darling women was beyond praise! I had a nurse for the first week or two as I was running a continuous temperature and was delirious now and then, and Dr. Barton would not hear of either Aunt Mary or Chloris sitting up at nights with me; which apparently the nurse had to do at first, as I was so restless and noisy! Talking and muttering, she told me afterwards, incessantly about "witches and devils" and "curses and enchantments—enough to make your blood run cold, if you

believed in such things." Luckily Nurse Lindsay didn't! Being a practical, hard-headed young woman, she discounted all my delirious talk as figments of a restless imagination; afterward I used to wonder what on earth she would have said had I ever told her how painfully true were at least some of the uncanny things of which I must have talked?

No news from Gilda; but I did not expect it. I was sure she would know where I was, through the crystal ball she owned, and through which, she had boasted, she could keep watch on me wherever I might be. I knew something of what she was doing, from what Chloris told me she got from Rena, who was by way of being friendly with Irina; Irina had apparently returned to Gilda, whom she had always adored, as her personal maid.

The date of Gilda's Show was near, and she was working hard preparing models for it, also going out and about and entertaining a good deal—probably in order to show people as a whole that she was far from wearing the willow for a husband who had left her! She had told Irina that I had treated her very badly, and she was glad to be rid of me; what further details of my supposed bad treatment of her she spread around London amongst our friends, I neither knew nor cared.

Naturally, I realized as soon as I was well enough to realize anything at all, that in leaving Gilda so soon after the death of our child I was sticking my neck out, and in the eyes of the conventionally-minded I could be nothing but a brute and a cur; and knowing that Aunt Mary's having given me haven must inevitably mean that both she and Chloris would come in for much of the blame attached to me, I told them that as soon as I could be moved I ought to go to a Nursing Home. But Aunt Mary would not hear of it; and in this, rather to my surprise, Dr. Barton agreed.

"Everybody knew that I had fled to Aunt Mary's. The damage was done!" he said bluntly. Actually, the only real way of stopping further gossip and scandal would be for me to return to my own home and be nursed by Gilda—which

I refused even to consider, with a violence that shook him a good deal! But he listened carefully when I told him what was nothing but the plain truth—that for over a year now my wife and I had been completely estranged, and had only remained together for the sake of the child; and that I had no intention, now or at any future time, of returning to her. Our marriage had been a tragic mistake, and but for allowing her every generous allowance I could make, I never wished to see her again; nor did she wish to see me. Maybe (I said) the blame was mainly mine and if she said so, I would not argue with her! I begged the doctor to do his best to circulate what I had said amongst our mutual friends; and to his credit, he agreed and loyally carried out his promise.

When I got well enough to see my intimate friends I told them all the same story, and also my faithful little Miss Burton, so that my staff understood the position—and as I found that most of them except one or two men who had fallen for Gilda's attraction, sympathized with me, I felt relieved.

The moment I was well enough to discuss business, I had sent for Miss Burton, and from my bed dictated a letter to my Bank, instructing them to pay the rent and rates etc. of my home, also to pay into Gilda's account a more than handsome sum per month for her living expenses. She already had a generous settlement, made on her marriage to me; and I dictated a letter to her in which I told her that I was willing also to continue her dress allowance, and would pay for the hire of the Gallery she wanted for her Show. But (I said) that was all she could expect.

I added that I had long felt, as she must also have done, that our marriage was no longer a happy one, and now that our child was dead there was no longer any reason to try and keep up a façade for the sake of the world at large, for whose opinion I did not care a damn. If she was in any difficulty regarding money, or anything else, she was at liberty to consult my lawyer, and I would pay her bill with him; but outside this, there was no point in our meeting again.

I had no answer from her; but I had not expected one. I had done what I felt was my duty towards her, and now what I wanted to do was to get back my health and strength; and in time—I hoped—manage to bribe or persuade or bully, if I could, Gilda into giving me a divorce. It would have to be an arranged divorce, that I knew, as I would never drag Chloris through the publicity of a case in which she figured as co-respondent—but those details did not worry me for the moment; I was too thankful to be free from the woman who now really appalled me to think about anything else!

As soon as I was really beginning to get over my breakdown, Dr. Barton told me he wanted me to go into the country to convalesce and get really strong again; but Aunt Mary suggested that a better idea would be for me to accompany her and Chloris to Spain, where they had planned a summer holiday; an idea which rejoiced me, needless to say—and so it was arranged. I spent two of the happiest weeks of my life with those two darlings, at Marbella, on the Costa del Sol; and during that time we got down to serious discussion of the future.

Aunt Mary knew by this time, of course, how we felt about each other, and hoped and prayed almost as fervently as we did that Gilda might, some time later on, be persuaded into divorcing me so that we could marry. The only thing I could think of that might really sway her our way was money; and well as I was doing, I could not see any chance of her consenting to release me except by the payment of a sum so huge that it would cripple me for the rest of my life, even prevent my marrying—which would delight her catlike cruelty, of all things!

But meantime, although my "second", Martin Palgrave, plus the faithful Miss Burton, had with the utmost gallantry kept the flag flying at "Randolph & Son" during my absence, I must, now I was fit again, get back as soon as possible, to take at least some of the burden off their shoulders. I wrote to Miss Burton on the eve of my return to London, telling her to hunt up a good estate agent and see what she might find in

the shape of suitable bachelor flats; but until I found a suitable one, Aunt Mary insisted on my going back to the spare room I had occupied at the maisonnette she shared with Chloris.

Much as I longed to close with the idea, I protested that I didn't think it was wise. Already it was widely known, amongst Gilda's friends at least—which meant mine as well as others unknown to both of us—that immediately upon leaving my wife I had fled to Chloris' home. The fact that I had collapsed on her doorstep and been conveyed to bed a very sick man would only be known to a few, and quite possibly not believed by them, people's minds being so constituted that they tend always to believe the worst instead of the best of their neighbours! The fact that Chloris was my cousin and well and truly chaperoned by her stepmother might have mitigated things to a certain degree; but the fact that it was now a matter of four or five weeks that I had been with them, and during that time I had made no personal contact at all with my wife, would not please my judges; so I said that perhaps it would be better if now I was well again I took refuge at my Club, when we got back to London, until I could find a flat that suited me. But Aunt Mary was very dogmatic about this.

"All right," she said. "I could go to the Club sometime, if I liked—but she saw no point in rushing there at once! Better come back to her for at least a few days, and while I was there, try to work out which pieces of my personal furniture I would want to take over from my house into my new flat, when I found one I liked? As to worrying about people gossiping about my having taken refuge with her and with Chloris—well, perhaps that was unfortunate; but it had happened, hadn't it, and there was no use getting bothered about it! I'd fallen ill on her doorstep, and nothing would have prevented her taking me in and looking after me! So that was that. Let people talk—they would soon find something else to gossip about!"

Aunt Mary's refreshingly commonsense point of view de-

lighted me, and needless to say I went back with them and took up my abode, for a time at least, in the pleasant little spare room I had occupied while I was so ill.

I had no intention of staying there indefinitely, of course. When I succeeded in finding a flat I liked and could make arrangements with Gilda about removing such furniture as I might need from our home—using my lawyer, of course, to deal with her, as I had no intention of making any personal contact with her if I could avoid it—I would move out, and live as a bachelor once more; only hoping that this stage would be a temporary one and that somehow I would be able to win my freedom and the right to marry the girl I adored.

I managed to get my clothes and the papers from my desk at home, by telling Miss Burton to write to Gilda saying I needed them, and if she would give instructions to Irina to pack them into such luggage as I had left behind me, I would arrange for one of my clerks to collect them at a time that suited her, and deliver them to me. Which was duly done; and the first night or two after our return to London I spent with Chloris and Aunt Mary, making lists of my pet pieces of furniture that I would need—if, that is, Gilda would consent to releasing them—in the furnishing of my flat. Glass, plate, china, linen, I would leave to her, and buy new stuff for myself; Chloris and I might have been planning to purchase these things for our own home as we discussed what would be needed, colour, shape, quality. Indeed, I am sure that at the back of both of our minds was the feeling that perhaps—and *perhaps!*—we might be doing that. . . .

The date was fast approaching when Gilda's Show was to be held at the most fashionable Gallery in the West End, and I was faintly puzzled that up to date she had made no approach to Chloris regarding borrowing her finest model, the Humming Bird, that she had given Chloris as a Christmas present. I mentioned this to Chloris, but she did not pay much attention to it. Probably, she said, Gilda had produced something that she considered far finer than the Humming Bird,

handsome as that was. She was glad she hadn't wanted it, though.

She had grown used to the gleaming patch of vivid colour that the creature made, perched on the top of the tall Regency escritoire opposite her bed, and would miss it if it were not there. It was such a lovely piece, though, that she was really surprised that Gilda had not wanted to borrow it for her Show. . . .

It was not long before we knew why Gilda had left the Humming Bird where it was. . . .

15

The Flash in the Dark

NOW before I can tell you of this happening, I must outline to you the way in which I came to see it all—the beginning, so to speak, of the end.

The room I was occupying in the Ionides' flat was an attic room; one of two attics, the smaller of which was used as a bedroom for Rena, and the larger as a spare for any guest who might be staying. As I have already described, the floor below held Aunt Mary's room and Chloris' and the bathroom, and the floor below that, the main floor, held the drawing-room, a tiny hall and small dining-room, and of course the kitchen.

Now for some reason, on each side of the short steep flight of stairs that led from the bedroom floor to the attics, a small window had been inserted in the wall, high up, possibly to give a little light on the staircase, which was dark but for the electric light—very likely the house had been built before the invention of electric light. One window gave upon Aunt Mary's room and the other upon Chloris'; and at the risk of being accused of becoming a vulgar Peeping Tom, I used sometimes, when Chloris had gone to bed early and I went later, to stand on tiptoe and try to catch a glimpse of her as she moved about her pretty bedroom preparing for bed. Frankly, I never succeeded in seeing very much. Not only was the window small, but the glass in it was an inferior sort and

rather blurred; all I could see was part of her bed, the tall bulk of the Regency escritoire against the wall opposite it, and part of her dressing table, with the dressing stool before it. Most of the room was not visible from the angle at which the window was set, and I knew that in the wall under the window was the door into the bathroom where, Chloris had told me, she usually dressed and undressed; so except for an occasional passing glimpse, I saw little of her. And yet out of sheer habit I found myself standing on tiptoe every night as I passed the window, and little as I could see, I would kiss the palm of one hand and lay it upon the glass of the lower part of the window feeling, in the foolishly-sentimental way of a young man blindly in love, that somehow, in some way, that kiss might reach her in spirit, though not in body.

I was actually doing that one evening, rather late, when I caught a curious flash through the glass—a rainbow coloured flash it was, brief and then gone. I stared, and saw it come again and yet again, as though some mischievous child was flashing a pocket torch off and on, though no torch that I ever saw had a many-coloured flash. It came again and, startled, I stood on tiptoe to try and see further; but that failed and, going up to my room. I caught up the fat copy of a book on antique silver that I had been studying that lay upon the table beside my bed, and coming down again, stood on the book and peered down into Chloris' room.

Now I could see considerably more of the room, about half-way up to the bed from the foot-end, where my blessed girl was lying asleep—or so I hoped—and as I looked down, I caught again that odd darting glimpse of colour, seen like a passing lightning-flash, then gone again.

It seemed to come across and across her bed, and for some reason it worried me, although I kept on telling myself that it *could* only be something reflected from the street outside—for Chloris always slept with her curtains open, though Rena shook her head and muttered warnings about the danger of sleeping unprotected under the moon. For two or three minutes I watched, and the odd flashes came and went, and

then it struck me that as the Ionides' maisonnette was at the top of a tall old Victorian house, it would surely be impossible for anything in the street below to be reflected—not once, but several times—in a room so high up?

Just then I heard a sort of little cry or whimper and saw the bedclothes stir, and knew that Chloris had awakened—and running down the stairs, I knocked at her door. Her cry, faint as it was, gave me a sufficient excuse, and when she opened the door, looking quite adorable in a flimsy pink nightgown trimmed with Greek lace, she looked at me in astonishment, and darting back into her room, re-appeared huddling a quilted pink dressing-gown over her nightgown. I laughed, and yet I loved it—the curious mixture in Chloris of a modern young woman tackling a modern job in a completely satisfactory way, and an old-fashioned girl with, at times, almost Victorian reactions, made, for me at least, an unusual and heady sort of attraction.

"It's all right, I'm not going to rape you—though I'd like to very much, all the same!" I said. "But I was going up to bed, heard you cry out, and wondered if there was anything the matter?"

Her hand was at her throat as she answered.

"I thought it was Mother or Rena—I'd been asleep for ages, I thought, and yet it isn't really late. I awakened because I felt something prick me—like a wasp sting, or something like that." She took her hand away and, turning her face to the light, I examined the long white throat before me—and lo, its pallor was marked by a tiny red mark, like a pinprick! As I stared, she touched her cheek with one finger, and I saw that just beneath one eye there was a second little puncture—the sort of miniature wound that might be left by a stinging creature of the wasp or mosquito class. I was confounded, for it was only early spring, and even in high summer, mosquitoes are not so plentiful in London that they tend to attack people in their homes!

"Does it hurt?" I asked. She shook her head.

"No, not now. I felt the sting once and thought it was

part of a dream until it came again, near my eye, and then I woke up and jumped out of bed—and that must have been when I cried out. But what on earth is it? It doesn't itch or anything at all now."

"Then it can't be a mosquito bite," I said, "because those itch like blazes—don't I know it, I've been stung by the brutes often enough when I've been in mosquito country! But if it isn't a mosquito, what on earth can it be?" Our talking had now aroused Rena, who appeared from her room, a fearsome apparition in a red woollen dressing-gown and ancient felt slippers, with her gaunt face hooded in a green woollen shawl. Chloris recounted the adventure to her and showed the marks; Rena frowned heavily, and then went off down to the kitchen regions to fetch the Flit gun, with which she proposed to fumigate Chloris' room right away, to rid it of whatever unwelcome insect had attacked her beloved nursling.

When she had vanished down the stairs I took Chloris into my arms and held her tightly for a heavenly moment, and then tore myself away and went upstairs to my room; for I knew well that Rena would not leave Chloris' side now until she had seen her safely asleep again. In the morning, with careful make-up and an extra spot of powder on, there was no sign of the mysterious stings; and as Chloris and I had agreed not to mention the incident to Aunt Mary, and had forbidden Rena to speak of it also, the matter passed off, and we went off to our respective duties as usual.

Now this was the week in which Gilda's exhibition was to open, and I was glad that Mrs. Bruce, Chloris' boss, was considerate enough to despatch another journalist on the opening day to describe the show, interview Gilda and the rest. Knowing that Gilda's husband had taken refuge with Aunt Mary—was, in fact, at the moment staying under the same roof with Chloris!—Mrs. Bruce had guessed how matters stood between us. I knew she did not like Gilda—in point of fact, few women took to her, though she had a certain allure for many men; but Mrs. Bruce was fond of Chloris, and had a liking for me, so she was kind enough to arrange things so

as to spare Chloris the embarrassment of having to interview Gilda herself.

I was still surprised that my wife had made no approach to Chloris to borrow for her Show the Humming Bird that was so fine a specimen of her work. But she had not done so, and had evidently worked so hard on other specimens, mostly of birds as usual and, less often, fish or insects, that the papers greeted the Show with enthusiasm, and Gilda was freely described as being "one of the finest modern exponents of this little-known art, that of ceramics" which must, I knew, have pleased her immensely. The Gallery was crowded with notable people—not for nothing had Gilda spent the three years since she married me in cultivating the rich and famous amongst my friends!—and Chloris' paper carried a long article about the Show and about Gilda, centred with a photograph showing my wife, looking her most picturesque in a green *moiré* frock from Dior plus a hat that seemed an entire halo of green osprey. The picture was in colour, which of course did full justice to the contrast between Gilda's ruddy hair and her gown and crown of feathers; and it was obvious from the crowd that surrounded her, and from the adulatory tone of the critics in the papers that carried accounts of her Show—and most of them did—that the strange woman who was my wife (though, thank God, now in name only) had had what amounted to a triumph, socially as well as artistically! Much of her stuff had been sold on that first day, and sold at good prices; a personal interview with her was announced for the following day on T.V., so for once both her cupidity and her vanity must have been thoroughly satisfied.

Needless to say, we all three watched the T.V. interview with the greatest interest, and once again Gilda showed herself off at her best. Wearing a sari-like draped evening gown and some of her handsomest antique jewellery, she certainly looked more than effective; and as she had brought with her three of what she described as the "best models she had recently done," a lemon-crested cockatoo, a brilliantly-coloured macaw and a kingfisher holding a dragonfly in his beak—most

of the interview centred round her work, as she had intended it to do; and in the end it was certain that many of the viewers of that particular interview would be moved to go and buy something by Gilda Pirelli—she always used her Italian name for her work as an artist—or feel that they were no longer “with it”, in the social sense!

I was glad that the Show and everything connected with it had been a success, as I hoped that now Gilda might be so content with the life of a famous and successful career-woman that she might be willing to consent to a divorce—I was ready enough to bribe her into doing this, as long as her demands were not too absurdly high! So after talking to Chloris for a long and happy hour after Aunt Mary had gone to bed, I bade my darling good night, held her close for a long delicious moment, and after seeing her safely within her room, went on up to my comfortable little attic. I had a good night, as I felt more hopeful regarding Gilda's attitude towards me—or rather, shall we say, less hopeless?—and awoke in the morning feeling so bright that I whistled cheerfully as I bathed and dressed. As there was only one bathroom available and Aunt Mary always took her bath at nights, I took mine pretty early in the morning so as to leave it free for Chloris later; and as I ran down the stairs past the bathroom door I heard her splashing about in the bath, and hoped she felt as fit and well as I did.

But my hope was in vain; for when she appeared in the doorway, just as I was beginning to tuck into my plate of porridge followed by bacon and eggs (luckily for me, since my arrival Rena had become inured to the British habit of eating a solid breakfast) Chloris had one hand up to her face, and her smooth brow was creased by a frown. I jumped up and went to kiss her, and I saw with dismay that her hand had covered a tiny red wound on one cheek, just below the eye.

“My God, you've been bitten again!” I exclaimed, and Chloris nodded.

“Twice!” she said dismally. “The pain was so sharp that it woke me up—and do you know, Keith, as I woke, I swear

I saw something like a coloured lightning-flash dart across the room and disappear!"

"Sit down and eat some breakfast," I said, pushing her into a chair. "I'll pour out some coffee for you while you tell me—this is too extraordinary for words, but we'll get to the bottom of it somehow. Go on, drink this, and then try to eat something—if it's only toast and marmalade. . . ."

Chloris made a valiant pretence at eating, but it was a poor effort, for she was evidently badly shocked and frightened; as indeed I was.

She showed me the second "sting" which was at the base of her throat—the high neck of the jumper she had chosen to wear that day hid it, but when she pulled the "turtle neck" of the jumper away, I could see the wound very plainly and I frowned, distressed; for like the wound in her face, while still small, both marks were, I felt, larger than the first I had seen, which were pinprick size and might well have been what we thought—only mosquito bites. These wounds were surely too large for insect bites, either, but what they were I couldn't make out. As I let her collar slip back into place so that it covered the wound, Chloris said.

"I put this highnecked jumper on to hide the place, as I didn't want Aunt Mary to see it and get scared. I'll smother the one on my cheek with powder when I go in to see her before I leave for the office, but I left it for you to see, Keith. I'm scared! What on earth is it?"

"I'm damned if I can give a guess," I said, realizing that in my anxiety I was myself making only a poor pretence of eating my excellent eggs and bacon. "If they are not insect bites, what on earth can they be? I'd have thought, anyway, that Rena's activities with Flit that first time this happened would have kept any sort of insect-life at arm's length for a long time to come!" I pushed away my empty plate and reached for the toast. "D'you think you should see Dr. Barton and ask his advice?"

"I will, if you like," Chloris said. "But I'd better go to him, as if he calls here Aunt Mary will want to know why, and I

don't want her to know about this." I drank a gulp of coffee—I was thinking hard.

"You say you saw a sort of coloured lightning-flash just as you woke up," I said. "Do you know that on the night the first stings—let's call 'em that—happened, I was—er—passing the little window on the stairs that overlooks your room, on my way up to bed, and I saw several of those flashes?"

Chloris stared at me.

"No! Not really?" she breathed. "But even if you did, how can there be any sort of connection between them and these mysterious stings?"

I shook my head.

"Don't ask me," I said. "I've no idea—and yet I've an odd feeling that there is some connection."

"Well," said Chloris, in her turn pushing away her plate, "it's the most mysterious thing in the world, and definitely worrying—I'm afraid to tell Rena, for fear she insists on sleeping in my room to try and protect me! As though she could prevent this damn creature, whatever it is, from stinging me if it wants!" She rose to get her hat and coat, and just then Rena came into the room. Chloris' hand flew to her face, but it was too late to hide the red wound below her eye and Rena, stopping her as she was about to leave the room, laid a hand on her shoulder and holding her still, examined the place closely, frowning as she did so.

There ensued a hurried conversation in Greek, of which I could only follow a few words here and there; but when Chloris was released and went out, leaving Rena, the frown still heavy on her gaunt face, to clear away the breakfast things, I went into the hall after Chloris and asked what had been said.

Chloris, who was standing before the hall mirror dabbing powder on the wound—she always looked into Aunt Mary's room to say good-bye before she went to the office—glanced at me and frowned in her turn.

"Rena wants to sleep on the floor in my room, as I feared,"

she said, "but I simply forbade her, and told her I wasn't a child any more! But she is worried about this damned sting, and she thinks it is something to do with Gilda! Of all the..."

"Now don't start saying 'of all the idiotic things'," I said, "because both you and I know that Gilda is capable of—well, of many things that normal people would call unthinkable. But what makes Rena think of Gilda in connection with you? She practically told me she didn't care a damn what I did with you."

There was a pause, and then Chloris, finishing her dabbing, turned to face me with an air of resolution.

"I didn't want to tell you—you've had more than enough trouble and worry over Gilda," she said, "but perhaps it is better you should know. Rena, who speaks several languages, as you know, speaks Italian, and is by way of being a friend of both Maria and Irina. Maria has left, I know; but Irina has gone back to Gilda as her maid, and I know that Rena meets Irina sometimes on her time off—she's always suspected Gilda ever since she met her and feared her doing me a mischief, and she keeps an eye on her via Irina because of that. And she's just told me that the last time she saw Irina, the girl told her that she had overheard Gilda talking to a friend of hers called Signora Lesando—yes, there is that Isolda woman again, and for no good purpose either, I'm sure!—who had come in for tea. They were discussing you over tea, and about your leaving Gilda and going to stay with Aunt Mary. They didn't believe that this was due to an accident really, that you had collapsed ill outside her flat and been carried inside unconscious; they were sure it was all a pre-arranged thing between you and Chloris—and Isolda was sympathizing with Gilda over being deserted; but Gilda laughed and said, on the contrary, she was glad to get rid of a stupid fool of an Englishman and to be free again! But when Isolda spoke of divorce, Gilda hardened up at once. She did not care in the least, she said, if you lived with Chloris or with any other woman, though had it not been that the presence of Aunt

Mary made this impossible, she would have seen to it that the scandal of Chloris and myself living together would have resounded throughout London! But divorce, oh dear no! She had given it out to the world at large that I had deserted her in the most brutal way—just after the tragic loss of her only child, too!—and as far as she could blacken my name and gain me the reputation of being heartless, a brute and a libertine, she was doing just that—but as for divorcing me, she would never do it! See another woman put into the place she had occupied? Never!”

“And then?” I said.

“Then,” Chloris said, “their voices had dropped and she could not hear the rest. But she said their voices were full of venom, and especially Gilda’s. So there you are, Keith! Naturally Rena was alarmed, for she believes with all her heart in the power of witchcraft! Today she is visiting a priest she knows well, in the Greek Orthodox Church in Latimer Road, where she goes every Sunday, to try and get him to let her have some holy water with which to sprinkle my room.”

“Will he do it, do you think?” I asked, faintly sceptical.

“I think so,” said Chloris. “The priests of the Greek Church, you know, are not so anti-witchcraft as your priests, and Rena is greatly respected in the congregation, I know. He will know she would not ask for such a thing without what she considered grave reason. So now you know the worst, and don’t look so gloomy about it, my darling!” Standing on tiptoe, she laid her soft lips against my cheek, but before I could catch and hold her in my arms she was away and darting up the stairs towards Aunt Mary’s room. “Can’t stop—I shall be late as it is! See you tonight for dinner, and till then, God bless. . . .”

I 6

The Humming Bird

I BADE Chloris good-bye with more cheerfulness than I really felt, and during the day, though I got through my regular work pretty well, I found myself worrying more and more about the coming night; and on my way home to Aunt Mary's I came to a definite conclusion.

Somehow I must keep watch on Chloris that night, and try to see what on earth was causing these mysterious attacks upon her—and I thought I knew how I could do it!

The bathroom of the Ionides' maisonnette had evidently been made by splitting off part of the large room that had once faced Aunt Mary's. It led out of Chloris' bedroom and possessed two doors. One, that led into Chloris' room, and another that led out into the landing outside and faced the door of Aunt Mary's room. If I could abstract the key of the outer door so that Chloris couldn't lock it after she had gone to bed—though I didn't expect her to bother to lock it unless she was actually using it—I should be able to sneak downstairs, in soft slippers and a dressing-gown, slip into the bathroom, and setting the door ajar that led into her bedroom, keep watch and try to see what was happening.

Luckily I got back before Chloris did, and duly removed the bathroom key—there was only one; I knew she would never think of locking the inner door that led into her bed-

room; and as I made talk as cheerfully as I could to her and Aunt Mary during dinner, inside I was praying with all my heart that this night I might be allowed to solve the problem and stem the danger that now, I was sure, hung over my darling.

Chloris, of course, played up to me for all she was worth; but I could see that it was a strain, and she was looking so white and tired that Aunt Mary told her that she must be overdoing it at the office, and that she ought to go to bed early with a hot drink and a sleeping tablet. In which I supported her eagerly—rather, I could see, to Chloris' surprise, as the old lady generally retired to bed before we did and left us to ourselves for a precious hour. But of all things, tonight I wanted Chloris in bed and asleep pretty early; so, after drinking her coffee and watching a briefly amusing comedy sketch on T.V. she picked up the bag containing the embroidery she had meant to do, kissed me and her stepmother good night and went upstairs.

The faithful Rena would, I knew, already have placed the hot drink in a thermos flask on her dressing-table; and as I stared unseeing at the T.V. screen I found myself wondering whether the Greek woman had had any success with the priest she had intended seeing, and whether he had given her what she wanted to use as an extra protection against whatever was, she was sure, attacking her beloved nursling. I hoped and prayed she had, as I was now sure that she was right, and that the mysterious insect bites were somehow due to Gilda. After all, in the early days of their acquaintance, both Chloris and Aunt Mary had taken advantage of Gilda's expert knowledge of hairdressing and manicure, and allowed her to treat them both; so that she had in her possession the essential personal fragments such as hair, nail-parings and so on that a witch needed to use in her evil spells. . . .

For a time I made talk with Aunt Mary, and then she also went to bed; and when I heard her door close I went softly up the stairs to my own room and started undressing. Whether, if anything happened, I could do any earthly good, I did not

know, since I was up against something utterly mysterious! Something that, it appeared, could defy even tried and trusted guards such as the rosemary and garlic with which Rena kept Chloris' room supplied, the crucifix that, like me, she always wore, and for all I knew, several other precious things of the guardian amulet type that the faithful Rena might have hidden here and there about her, Chloris', chamber.

But somehow I felt I *must* try and see and understand these mystifying attacks that were being made on her, and what was causing them.

I undressed, donned pyjamas, dressing-gown and slippers, put an electric torch into my pocket, and then settled down to a half hour's waiting, as I wanted to be sure that Chloris was asleep before I ventured into the bathroom; and after that, I went softly down the stairs.

Across the small landing at the foot of the attic stairs three doors faced each other, on the right-hand side the single door of Aunt Mary's room, which was much the larger, and on the left-hand side two doors, the door of Chloris' bedroom, and the door of the bathroom.

As I slipped quietly into the bathroom, redolent of the delicious Greek bath salts that my girl always used, I heard a faint sound, the closing of a door, and peering out through the crack of the door I saw Rena, the faithful soul, emerge from her bedroom and steal down the stairs, clad in her red dressing gown and with her head hooded in a woollen scarf. She sat herself down cross-legged on the mat outside Chloris' door, and I smiled to myself—so there were to be two of us tonight trying to fathom the eerie mystery of the rainbow flashes and the wounds in Chloris' neck and face!

Drawing the outer door of the bathroom softly to, I peeped in at the inner door, that which opened into Chloris' room, and saw, in the moonlight which streamed into the room via the uncurtained window, that my beloved was already in bed and—I hoped—asleep. I could see the humped outline of her darling body as she lay on her side, facing the bathroom

door, and as I held my breath I could hear the soft sound of her breathing—yes, she was sound asleep! Would she, this night when two who loved her were on guard, be allowed to sleep in peace—or would the strange force that was attacking her defy us, and attack yet again? I prayed heartily for the first, and yet something in me feared the second! I folded a towel into a pad and placed it on the wooden toilet seat and ensconced myself there, wondering how long it might be before anything—or nothing—happened. It was somehow a forlorn sort of comfort to know that outside the second door, in the corridor, Rena was waiting and praying also, every bit as fervently as I. . . .

I could not possibly tell how long we both sat there in the darkness and the silence, hearing now and then the honk of a taxi, the faint roar of a car starting up in the street so far below, or the distant sound of a radio or television set being used in some neighbouring flat or other. As the time wore slowly on, I stirred and wished I dared smoke—but Chloris has one of the keenest noses for a smell I ever met, and what she would have said to me had I contaminated with the smell of tobacco her beloved bathroom, redolent normally of nothing but the bathsalts, powder and perfume she used, I did not like to think!

So I sat there patiently, my eyes glued to the long dark strip that was all I could see of the bedroom—I had not dared to set the door wide open in case Chloris awakened and saw it. When I crept into the bathroom from the landing, the inner door had been ajar only a few inches, so I left it at that; and I seemed to sit there for hours watching that long dark gap between the door and the door-jamb, when suddenly, across the dark strip, a coloured flash darted and vanished! I got up at once, and pushed the door softly open, and I saw, as I had seen before, that something like a miniature lightning-flash—or flashes rather—was darting here and there about the room! Across and across it went, and as I watched I could see that it seemed to dart ever and ever closer to the head of Chloris' bed!

I stood open-mouthed for a moment, bewildered, for beside the flashes of vivid colour, green, rose, gold, purple, that flickered and darted here and there with fantastic speed, so quickly that one's eyes couldn't follow one flash in particular, I could now hear the sound of wings! Wings fluttering rapidly . . . I was so astonished that I stood gaping at the dazzling maze of moving, hurrying colour that now whirled about the room, then suddenly I seemed to fasten on one darting flash, like a gold-feathered arrow with a green tail like a comet trailing behind, that was darting down straight at the top of the bed where Chloris lay sleeping! Still half-incredulous, I gaped—and then suddenly I saw in the moonlight that the Humming Bird, gold-crested, rose-breasted, green-tailed, was no longer in its place on the top of the escritoire! By some unholy means the thing had come to life, and was attacking Chloris, stabbing at her with its long needle-sharp beak, going for her eyes or her jugular vein!

Coming to life, with a roar of fury I burst into the room, switching on the light, and as I rushed in Rena followed me! For a mad moment the entire room seemed to swirl into a frenzy of coloured flashes and I heard Rena shouting out unintelligible Greek as Chloris, with a cry of pain and terror, woke up! I saw that Rena was flourishing about a sort of bottle in her hand, and as I plunged towards the bed and caught my girl in my arms, I felt cold drops on my face and realized that what Rena was flinging about the room must be the Holy Water she had hoped to get! I heard her shouting hoarsely in Greek.

“ετ’ ὀνομά τοῦ Θεοῦ πήγαυε ἀπόπου ἤλθεζ! *

Suddenly everything was completely normal in the room! The flashes, the sound of fluttering wings had vanished, and on the top of the escritoire stood the Humming Bird, whole, serene and beautiful as ever! I glanced down at the face of my beloved, resting against my breast, and breathed a silent prayer of thankfulness; for though there was a fresh and bleed-

* “Go to your own place, in the name of God!”

ing wound on one cheek, it was well below the eye, which the enchanted creature had plainly been attacking.

Blinking in the sudden blaze of light, I sat on the bed, holding Chloris tightly in my arms and watching Rena, who was standing up staring at the shape of the Humming Bird, solid and actual in its usual place—then I heard her speak half below her breath.

“Γπί τέλουζ κιορκιοθηκε! ’Η μάγιοόα νικήθηκε.” *

Then she reached up, seized the Bird, and stooping, with her other hand picked up the brass doorstep that Chloris always kept beside the door to prop it open on warm summer days. The doorstep was a heavy piece of antique Italian work, a satyr standing on a square base, and setting down the Bird on the carpet, the Greek woman brought the doorstep down upon it with a savage fury that delighted me! I saw the delicate porcelain of the Bird break into half a dozen pieces and as she struck again, into more and smaller pieces—and then, panting but satisfied, Rena squatted back on her heels. Gathering up some of the pieces in one hand, she studied them carefully and then beckoned me to come and look.

Laying Chloris back against her pillows with a tender kiss—she was wide awake now and trembling no longer, though blood from the wound inflicted by that infernal creature still streaked her cheek—I went over to Rena and looked eagerly into her hand, and as I looked I gasped! For here and there, plain to see, sticking out of the broken bits of china, were numerous hairs—and some of the hairs were red like Gilda’s and the rest brown, the light gold-brown hair of my beloved Chloris! The damn witch I had married had mingled her hair with that of Chloris’ in the clay of which she was kneading that damned bird, so that she had a complete and powerful focus for her illwishing—and had it not been for the sheer luck that had led me to notice the coloured flashes in Chloris’ room plus the protective love of her foster-mother Rena, my beloved girl might have lost the sight of one eye at

* “It is finished! She is defeated.”

least, or else bled to death from the stabbing of the jugular vein! Gilda's enmity had pursued me to the end—or nearly. She had known of my intention to force a divorce upon her, and had determined to get her blow in first—to punish me and vent her rage against Chloris with one blow, and I shuddered as I realized how nearly she had succeeded!

Chloris was now clamouring to know what had happened, and there was no reason for hiding anything. So Rena and I told her the truth, and showed her the broken fragments of the evil Bird that had been so cunningly installed in her room, where, when the "order" was sent to it by its mistress, it would lose its solid shape and become transformed into a darting intangible evil directed at a helpless victim who lay unconscious of its poisonous presence! How that same "order" was sent we never knew, but it did not matter. Chloris listened, her face white and tense with horror—and it was like her to say, as the terrible story came to an end.

"Oh, Keith, how she must have hated me—and how sorry I am for her. . . ."

So that is the end of my strange story. Black Magic is a boomerang and returns to its maker in the end—and so it was with this work of evil that had been set going by Gilda Pirelli. We talked until about three o'clock in the morning, when I insisted on both Rena and Chloris taking a sleeping tablet, and I took one myself, knowing that after the excitement of that experience we would never be able to sleep without some sort of help!

Actually, we *did* sleep, and I was sound asleep when Rena's knock came at my door next morning. I blinked and stared and shouted "come in" and glanced at my clock as I did so—eight o'clock, which was late for me—and I stared at Rena standing in the doorway. She still had her dressing-gown on, and I was glad to see that she also must have slept late, for the strain of that eerie adventure must have taken a severe toll of the woman's nerves. Her gaunt face was set and grave as she said soberly in English.

"Kyrie, the telephone has just rung. It came from Irina." I sat bolt upright, startled, as she went on.

"Irina say that she go, but ten minutes ago, to take in to Madame Gilda her usual cup of tea—and Kyrie, she find her lying dead, half in and half out of her bed!" There was an awestricken pause as we stared at each other.

"My God," I said at last. "How just! The curse went home to the one who sent it!"

Rena nodded.

"That is right, Kyrie. God, He is just! He fight on our side last night—and sent the witchwoman back to the Devil where she belong! And now, Kyrie, the way is clear for you and my Kyria to wed!"

I jumped out of bed, and seizing Rena by her shoulders, hugged her as she deserved. I bade her leave Chloris to sleep as long as she could—luckily it was Saturday morning, and she often slept late then, as she didn't have to go to the office on Saturdays—and tell Aunt Mary I had to rush away the moment I had had breakfast, as Irina had telephoned the news that Gilda had died during the night, and I must obviously go home to deal with the situation. While Rena hustled some breakfast together for me, I telephoned Dr. Barton, telling him the news and asking him to meet me at my house at 9.30, which he promised to do; I then rushed upstairs to bathe, shave and dress, gulped down my breakfast and was away in my car by a quarter past nine.

As my car rounded the end of the road I saw the figure of the doctor ascending the steps to the front door; drawing up, I leaped out, ran after him and joined him just as, in answer to his ring, Irina, her face blotched with crying, opened the door. On seeing me she burst into fresh tears and the doctor, stepping into the hall, laid a kindly hand on her arm.

"She's had a nasty shock," he said to me, "but I'll give her a sedative as soon as I've seen—er, Gilda. Now come on, Keith, let's go up."

Together we stood looking down at the body of the witch-woman who for three terrifying years had been my wife. She lay just as the girl had discovered her—both the maids had been too terrified to touch her. Indeed, the Russian cook who had taken Maria's place, had flatly refused to enter the room at all, as apparently she had regarded Gilda, like so many of Gilda's contemporaries, as at least something of a witch, and had only stayed with her because of the high wages Gilda had paid.

It looked as though Gilda had been asleep, suddenly awakened and been struck down as she awakened, for she lay half in and half out of her bed, which was a low one, so that while the lower half of the body lay still on the bed, the upper half trailed upon the floor. The arms were flung wide, with fists clenched, almost as though to fight off something—and my God, the look on her twisted face! During the years that have passed since that marriage of mine many of the painful and terrifying memories belonging to it have faded—but my memory of that face, twisted, savage, the eyes glaring and lips set in a fixed square grin of horrifying fury can never fade! I had never in my wildest dreams imagined a face so filled with evil, with hate and terror and rage combined. Stooping down, Dr. Barton picked her up by the shoulders and laid her body straight upon the bed, and then taking up the sheet, drew it carefully over her face. When he looked at me his own face was sober to a degree.

"Heart failure, I'm sure," he said, "though what brought it on, who can tell? I've often seen faces twisted in a sort of awful rictus at the moment of death, but this is the worst I've ever seen! Poor soul! Keith, I advise you to go downstairs and get yourself a strong drink—and I'll have one too when I've finished here, though I can't give a thorough examination yet. Get hold of that young maid and make her take a couple of these tablets and go and rest—they will make her sleep! And tell the cook not to disturb her. I'll send a nurse along to do the necessary here, and while you're downstairs you'd better telephone and make arrangements for the removal of

the body, or you'll have those two maids leaving. They won't stay here with a body in the house. . . ."

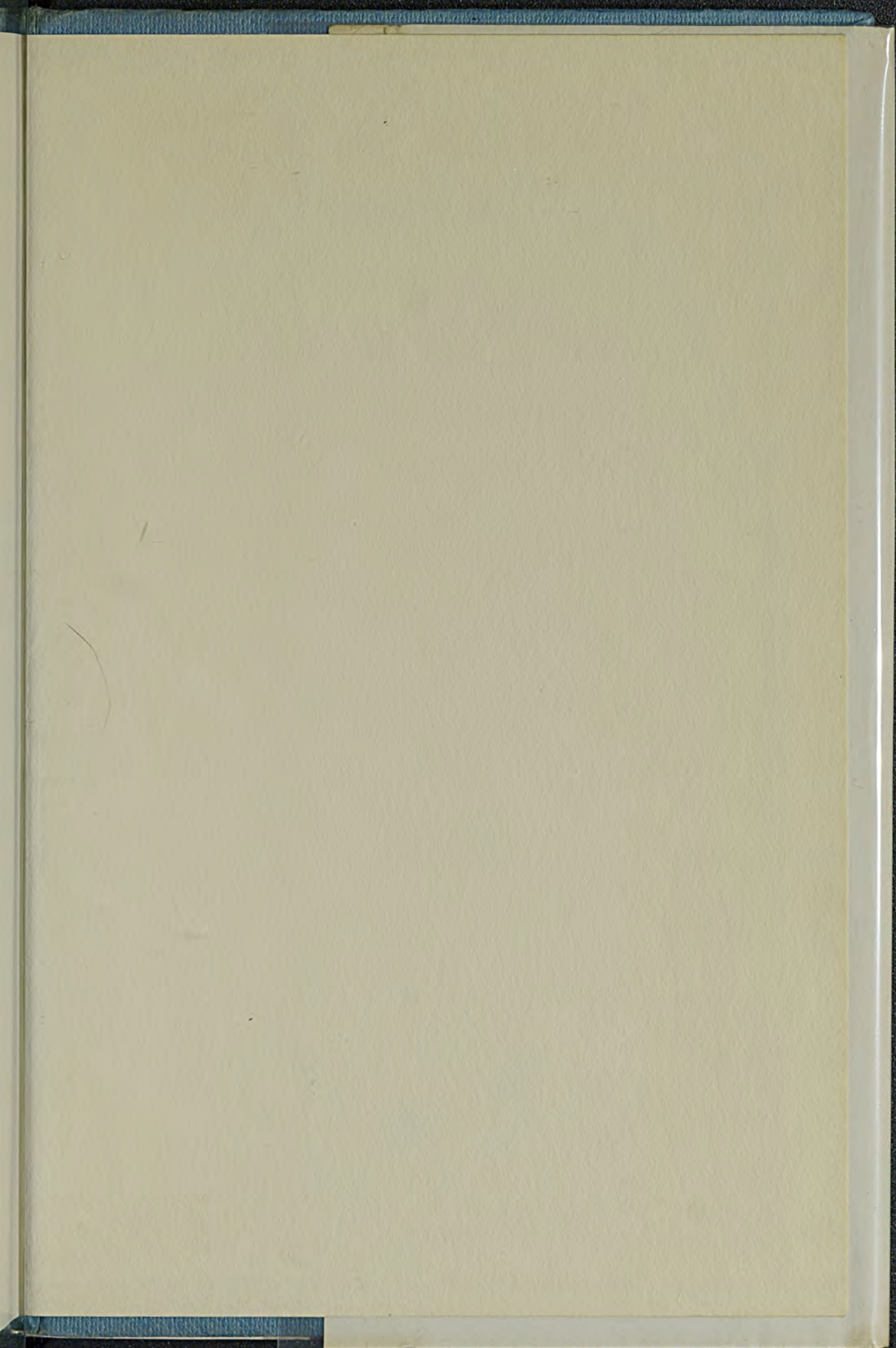
"They won't have to," I said. "I'm staying here now to see to things, so don't worry." The doctor nodded and, shutting the door behind me, I ran downstairs. I gave Irina the tablets and the cook the doctor's instructions—I found both girls almost tearfully thankful when I told them I was staying in the house from now onwards, so they would not be left alone—and then I shut myself up with a king-sized drink and the telephone.

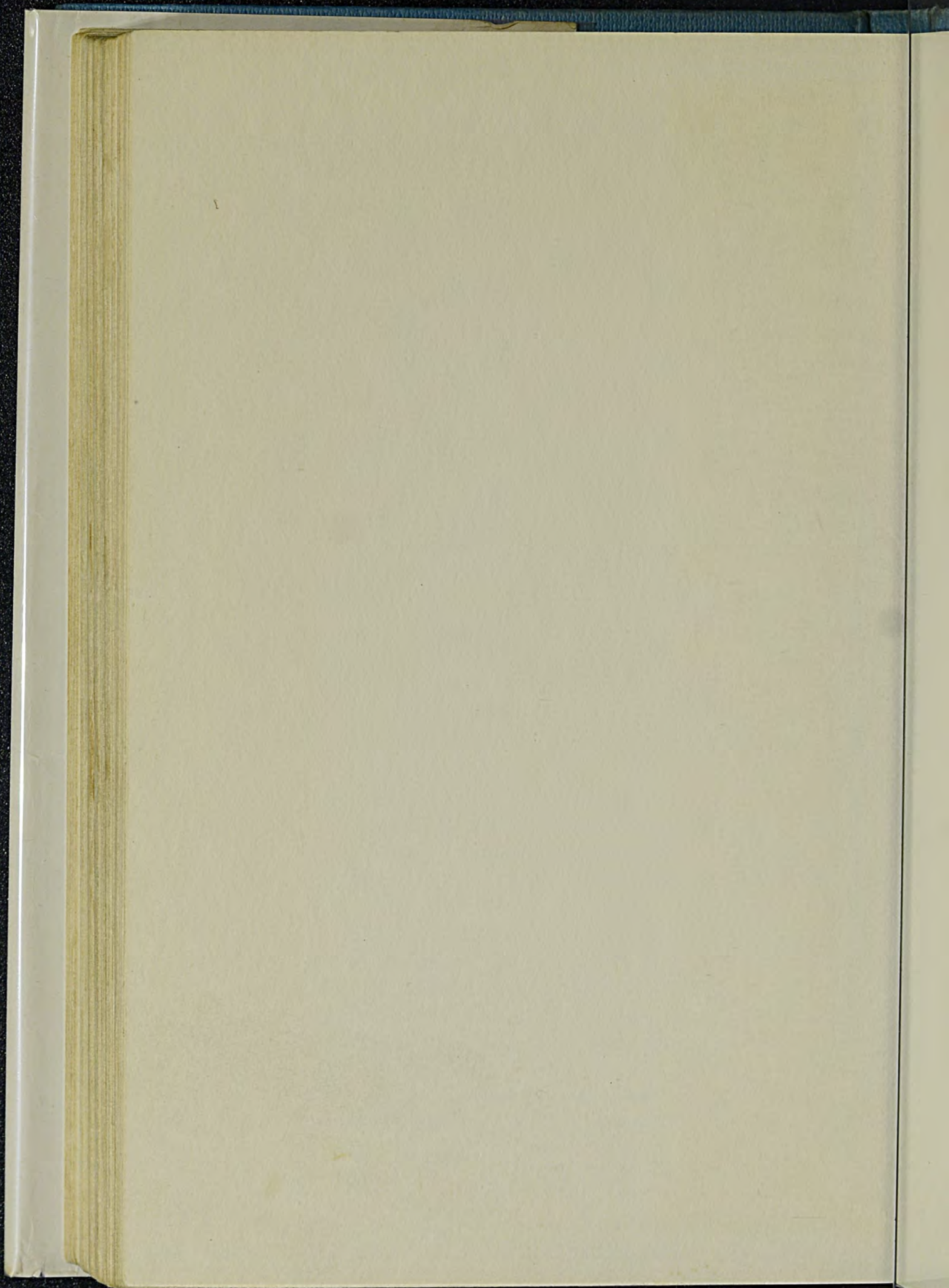
There is little more to tell. The doctor's final verdict was death from heart failure due to some shock, though the cause of the shock could not be ascertained; and once again I found myself thinking, with a wry amusement, of dear old Barton's face if I ever told him the real shock that had killed Gilda—the abrupt return to her of the evil that she had sent forth against Chloris! As I have said before, evil is like a boomerang that once set going, returns in the end to the one who threw it—and from the expression left on Gilda's twisted face one could guess at least a little of the shock of horror, astonishment and fury that had struck her as the dark thing she had released returned to her bosom, bringing her death in its train.

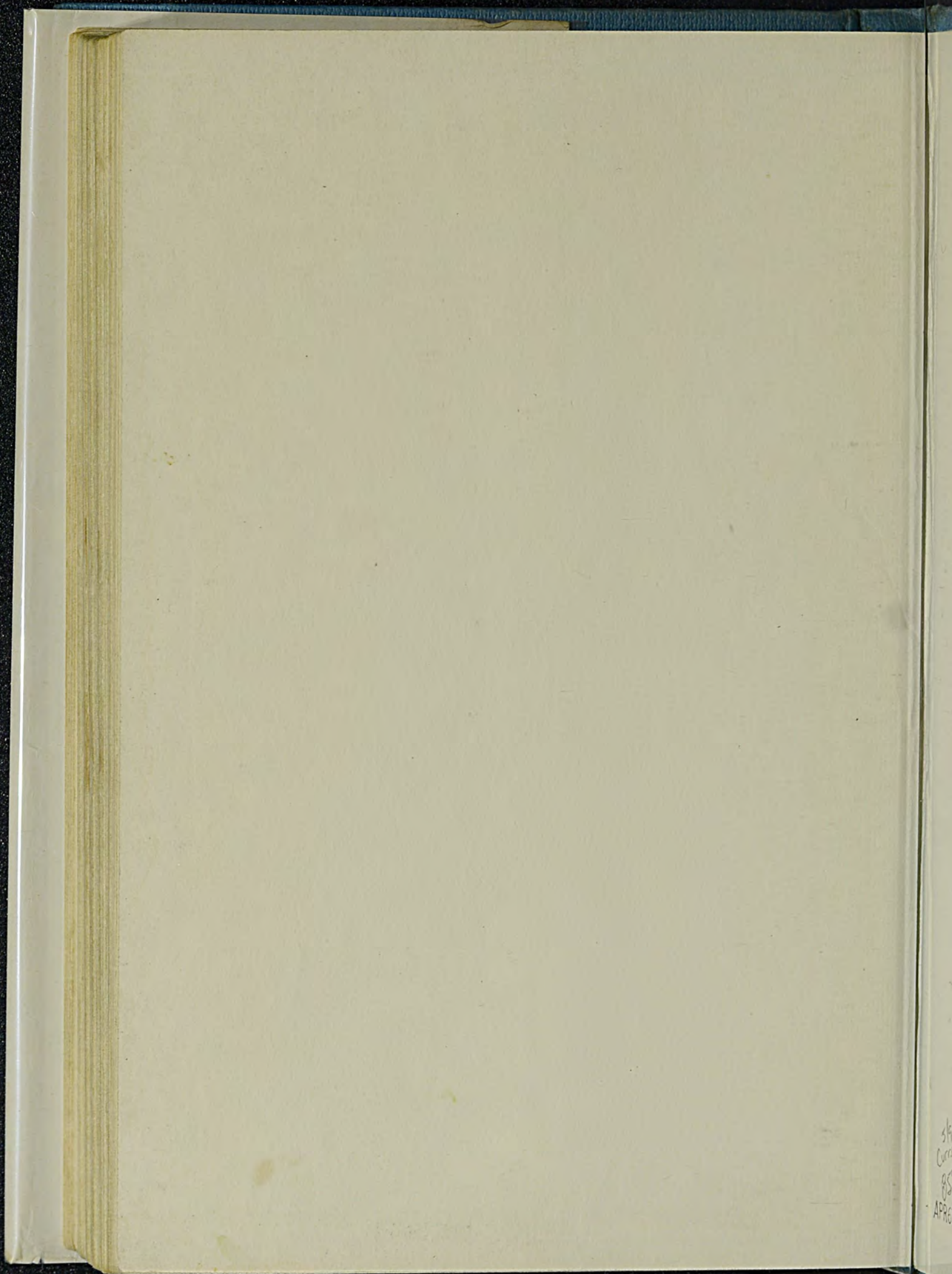
She had left orders that she desired to be cremated, with which I was greatly relieved, for I felt, and so did Chloris, that only her complete disappearance into the clear heart of fire could really wipe out that terrible creature that was Gilda; Gilda Pirelli, my wife for three years, and truly my bane and the bane of my little son. A few of my intimate friends came to the service, which was quiet and seemly, and after it was all over and I drove away with Aunt Mary and Chloris, I felt a peace to which I had long been a stranger. Dr. Vronski had been right again! The third death had come—and with it had come my release.

Now, in my truly happy life with my darling Chloris and the three lovely children she has given me, the memory of

those dreadful three years has largely faded—but not quite; and I write in the hope that somebody who reads this chronicle of a life all but ruined through that Black Magic, in which too few people now believe, may realize that it still exists, and should be shunned as though it were the plague—as indeed it is, physically and morally! If so, then the writing of this book will have been well worth while.







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By the same author

**THE TOMORROW
OF YESTERDAY**

In the days when Man was an ape-like brutish creature, the great civilization which had flourished on Mars was in turmoil. A few Martians managed to reach Earth, and in what is now Egypt they set about building civilization anew. They found Man brutish indeed, but not without intelligence, nor yet ineducable. By careful training and controlled breeding Man was raised above the other animals, and from the descendants of the Martians and the Earthlings arose the civilization of Greece. The pure Martians then withdrew to the great city of Atlantis. But their stay on this earth was only to be temporary, for the corruption of the blood by admixture of Earthling stock gave rise to jealousy and all the other sins. The Pacific colony was destroyed by the experiments of the scientists, and Atlantis was overwhelmed by the sea. Thus Man, imperfect but capable of improvement, was left to rule on the earth. A fantastic story? Incredible? *The Tomorrow of Yesterday* is told with such convincing detail, such a wealth of corroborating evidence, that the reader, sceptical though he may be, is convinced at last.

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Margery Lawrence

Margery Lawrence needs no introduction to her wide circle of readers. Born of a well-known legal family, she had the arts at her fingertips from early childhood, and though at first drawn towards painting as a career, turned at last towards writing stories as vivid and colourful as her painting.

She married Arthur Towle, younger of the two Towle brothers famous in the world of international hotels, and so has seen and known many countries which have provided her with much material for her books. During the war she remained in London with her husband, defying the fates in a top-floor flat; and after his death in 1948 spent much time abroad, especially in Spain, which she used as the setting for a successful novel, *Spanish Interlude*.

Miss Lawrence's work is varied in the extreme, ranging from stories of purely modern life to tales set in ancient times, as in *Daughter of the Nile*, *The Rent in the Veil* and in *The Gate of Yesterday*, in which the background is Greece in the time of Pericles.

She is a woman of varied gifts and catholic tastes. A keen musician—she has a good and well-trained contralto voice and sings much to her own accompaniment on the piano; mostly negro spirituals, old traditional Scottish and English songs and the like. She is an avid collector of books, curios and interesting friends, an embroidress of unusual gifts, a judge of good talk, good food and drink, an inveterate traveller and omnivorous reader. She loves the theatre, books and films, but has no taste for games or sport of any kind, with the exception of sailing, which she adores, being a foolproof sailor in any weather. She is also a strong believer in flying saucers and in the possibility of interplanetary communication, as in psychic science, which plays a part in many of her stories; and *Master of Shadows* is a sequel to her successful collection of uncanny stories published some time ago and entitled *Number Seven, Queer Street*.

Her recent books include a brilliant study of a problem child, entitled *Dead End*, and a dramatic story, *The Tomorrow of Yesterday*, of how Man as we know him came into being on earth.