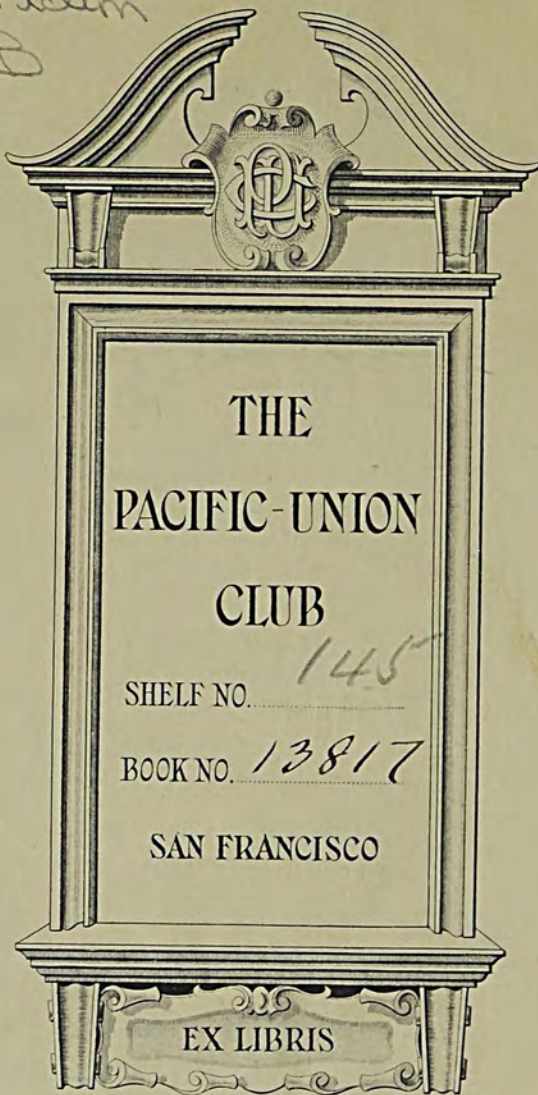




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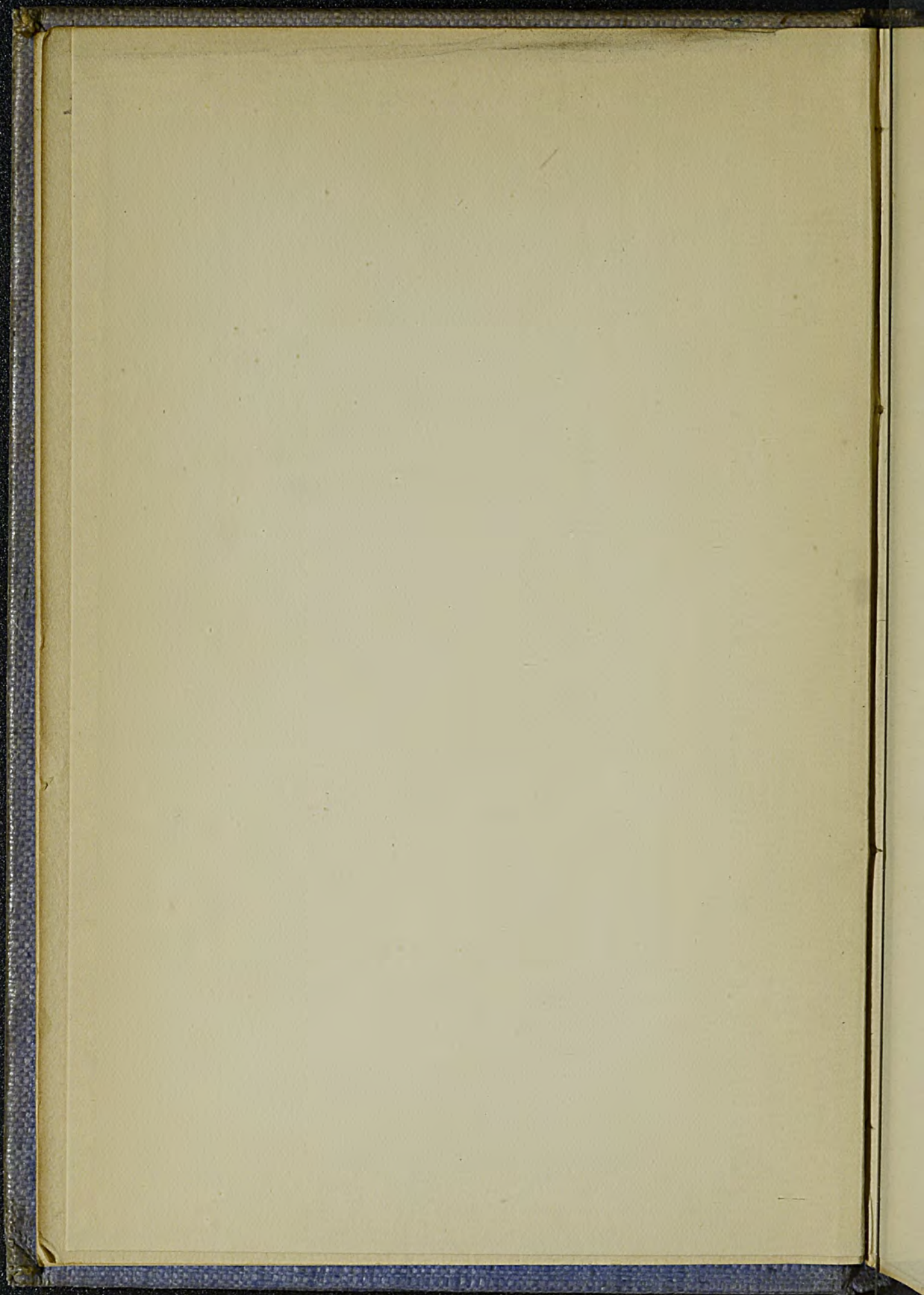
Georgia J. Bush

From S. M. H.

May 1896

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Nephelée



Nephelée

By

Francis William Bourdillon

London

George Redway

1896

Fiction

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Introduction

I AM often asked, like most other people, by the less wise of my acquaintance, if I "believe in" ghosts; and when I answer, simply and seriously, what is to my mind a very serious if not a very simple question, by saying "Yes," I am met with incredulity and derision. And I find that it is generally regarded as one of the chief gains of education and civilisation to be able to disbelieve in ghosts.

Now to my mind, on the contrary, it is one of the worst evils of our modern culture, and the nineteenth century science, of which we are so proud, that men are no longer able to believe in ghosts, or in the Supernatural, as supernatural, at all. For it is a simple and unalterable fact, a law of nature as constant as any sequence discovered by the scientists, that as soon as men cease to be-

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lieve in a thing, it ceases—not to be—but to reveal itself to them.

Nowadays we have enthroned Reason, and banished Belief. Everything is brought to the test of scientific explanation, that is, of Probability. In fact it has come to this, that whereas the larger mind of elder days balanced restlessly between Possibility and Impossibility, we, on the other hand, keep the index within the more prudent limits of Probability and Improbability.

In these matters I am thankful to say that I belong to the old world. There is nothing I distrust more than my own reason—except other people's; and nothing I more unhesitatingly trust than those subtle unreasoning instincts, which flash upon the soul as by some sixth sense, clear as eyesight, and as unimpeachable.

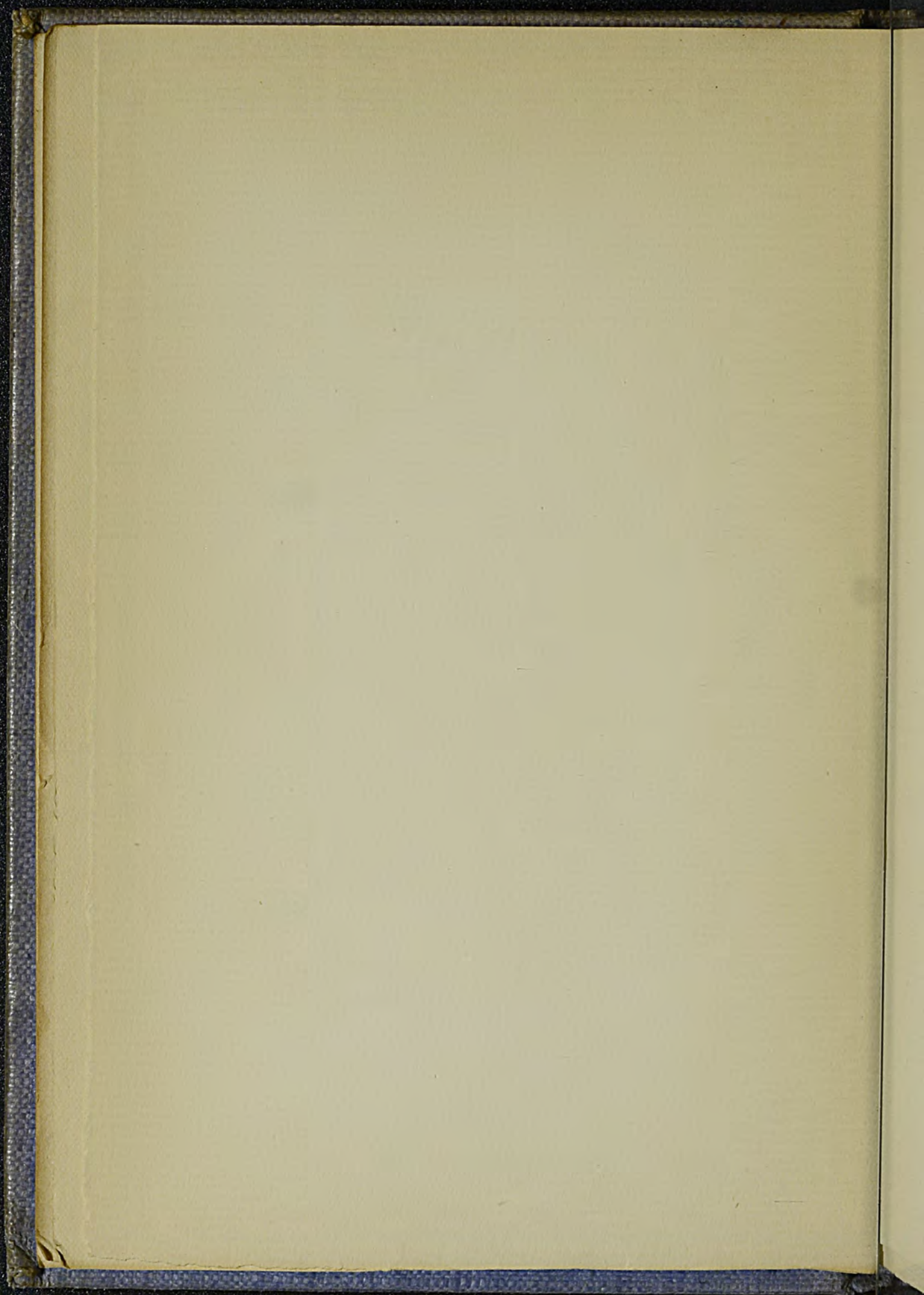
These few words of prelude are necessary, I think, to introduce the story I am about to write. In my own mind this Belief of mine—or Credulity, if you will: it is a better thing than Incredulity—is the explanation of all that is strange in the tale. The

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things came to me, because I was prepared to believe in them.

To many of my readers they will, I fear, throw a different light upon the story. The whole, they will say, are but the imaginations of a credulous and superstitious nature. Well; there is no medicine for a mind once blood-poisoned with scepticism; and in a generation such as this, it is, perhaps, as high an honour to be doubted, as it is in ages of Faith to be believed.

ENDYMION GERARD.



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CHAPTER I

IT was in the year 186—, on a warm, bright day of June. I was then a boy of between eighteen and nineteen, at a large public school, fairly popular with boys and masters, fair at work, and fair at play, but avoiding the condemnation of being “fair all round” by one excellence—I was more than fair, I was good, at music.

I was born with a great natural taste for music, and had fortunately had great advantages for its development in living most of my life in a cathedral town. My father and mother had both perished in the Indian Mutiny, and I had been left to the care of a childless uncle and aunt, my uncle being a canon of the cathedral.

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At school I had free permission to use the chapel organ whenever I would, and indeed I often played the service for the organist. On this particular day, which was a half-holiday, I had gone into the chapel directly after the school dinner, to let the great heat of the midsummer sun pass, before going to the cricket field. I can recall perfectly even now the cool delicious hush of the great chapel, as I came out of the hot glare of the quadrangle—the tiers of empty seats, a dropped book on the matting-covered marble of the floor, the flecks of coloured light here and there on seat and floor, from the stained-glass windows, the dulled sounds of the crowd of boys outside, separating this way and that way from the dining-hall.

I set the hydraulic power to work, mounted to the organ loft, pulled out a few soft stops, and laid my fingers on the keys. Open in front of me was Mendelssohn's sixth organ concerto, at the *andante* movement; and I was about to begin to play this, when something seemed to turn aside my will; my

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fingers fell on the notes in a rich soft chord, and half unconsciously, wholly unintentionally, I found myself playing a strange unknown air. I knew quite certainly that it was something I had never heard before, and yet it seemed half familiar, as if I might have heard it in dreams. Very sweet it was, and plaintive, full of human feeling, and with so much of the sense of song about it that I could almost imagine words were being sung to it as I played.

Once I played it, and again; and to make sure that I should not forget it I had begun it a third time, when a strange sensation came over me. I was conscious that some one else was somewhere near me. I turned round, as I was playing, to see if any one had come up into the organ loft. But no, there was only room for one or two persons beside the player, and there was certainly no one there. I rose and went down into the chapel, but it was quite empty; and indeed I had turned the key in the lock, and no one could have come in without knocking at the door for me to let him in. Yet I

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had still a strong impression of some one near me; whether in the body of the chapel or in the organ loft, I could not say, but very near me.

I went up the stairs again; certainly there was no one in the winding narrow staircase, dark as it was. I could not have passed another person. I moved the curtains; certainly there was no one there. And yet I was quite sure there was some one close by. I climbed up on to the seat and peered in among the organ pipes, in the thought that the organ tuner might have got into the organ. I called, but no answer came; and in fact it was impossible any one could be there without some of the pipes being out of place. I was completely puzzled, and sat down again to play with a strange feeling of constraint, as if I was playing before some one, and some one I did not know.

I tried to shake off the impression, and determined to play some spirited and unsentimental piece—the *Athalie* March—to change my current of feeling. But in some extraordinary way, I found when I began

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to play that I was not playing what I meant; I was again playing the unknown beautiful air which had had such a curious effect on me. I cannot quite describe the feeling I had at the time. I was firmly willed to play the March, but seemed unable to guide my will, or hold it to its own purpose. I felt much as when in a dream one tries to carry out some intention, and finds that one is doing some other quite unintended thing.

However, finding this to be the case, I let my will go, my fingers play as they would, and my reason no more resist the unreasonable sensation, but allow it to have its way with me. I at once found that I was getting more and more conscious of this presence. I *knew* there was some one close to me—exactly where, I could not tell; but near enough to touch, had it been tangible. Though no vision, real or imagined, rose before my eyes, yet my brain seemed to receive as vivid an impression as from eyesight, an impression sharp, startling, and inspiring as from the sudden sight of a

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very beautiful face. And as the impression grew clearer, I became conscious that it was a girl's presence, a girl's spirit, fulfilled with all the graces and sympathies that make the ideal of perfect maidenhood. It was these inward and spiritual attributes that alone seemed to influence my sensation, so that while I knew more of the temper and character of this creature, whoever or whatever she was, than if I had seen her in bodily presence, yet of her outward appearance I had no feeling. The grosser sense of sight seemed dead, and some finer, subtler sense to have wakened, to receive this keen impression of the unpictured spirit.

And as my fingers still played on, I found they were now no longer content with the simple air, but were beginning to entwine it with lovely variations: variations that never obscured the original air, but seemed to mingle with it, and to be the echoes that it woke in all things or people that heard it.

Then I became conscious that this girl-presence, whose mysteriousness had at first terrified me, was awakening a new sense,

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not of dread,—that my whole soul was being flooded with its sympathies and graces, and that the unexplained desire, “the desire of the moth for the star,” that we call Love, was quickening within me. And with this feeling the music—that I myself was playing—grew more tumultuous, the pure, clear air sounding through a passionate surge of harmonies and discords, while a wild ecstatic yearning thrilled me, that was neither grief nor joy, but an unutterable intermingling of both. . . .

Where was I? What was the knocking? Some one at the chapel door? I was still on the organ seat, but with my arms laid on the keys, and my head resting on them. Some one knocked again, and shook the door. I got up, and half-dazed made my way down the stairs, and opened the door. The sunlight dazzled me.

“Hullo, Gerard, I thought you must have gone, only I heard a sort of droning going on as if the organ was playing itself. Have you been asleep?”

I had recovered my senses now, and

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remembered that my friend, young Lord St. Denys, had promised to come for me at four to play cricket.

“Is it four o’clock?” I asked.

“Yes, struck some time ago. What have you been doing? Did you fall asleep over the keys?”

“I don’t know. Yes, I think I must have.”

Yes, I think I must have, but *when*?
Before that feeling? Before that vision?
Or after?

CHAPTER II

I WILL not describe in any detail the next few years of my life. Each of them, of course, brought its own events and its own changes, its own growth of feeling and widening of sympathy and deepening of knowledge. But these are things which can be expressed for others only in their results, not in their passing; and there is no conspicuous event of any visible significance in my life, till about four years had passed since my strange experience in the school chapel.

I had meantime finished my school-days, leaving school with a good character and a moderate stock of classical learning, and had been for some time in residence at one of the smaller colleges at Oxford, where I helped in my own maintenance by taking the post and salary of organist in the college chapel.

I need not say that I had often and unweariedly tried to reproduce the air which

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had come to me then with such strange and inexplicable sensations. But I had never succeeded. Nothing in all the four years had brought back one echo of that mysterious music, or one reflex of those strange sensations. My time of life was that in which the mind develops fastest, and new phases of thought had succeeded each other so fast that my old boyish life altogether seemed far behind me, and the time in the school chapel seemed most dream-like of all. Indeed I had come to believe that it had been nothing but a dream.

Meantime I had become possessed—like many a young Oxford student—with an enthusiasm for Greek art. I had covered the walls of my rooms with photographs and engravings of the most famous and beautiful Greek statues, and looked forward to nothing on earth so much as to a visit to Italy, and to Greece itself, where these wonders were to be seen in their actual existent reality. I had always had some turn for drawing, though my musical talent had so much preponderated that other

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tastes had been subordinated to it. But now I took to copying vigorously all pictures and reproductions of Greek statuary to which I could get access. At first my efforts were poor and unsatisfactory, but after a year or so I found myself able to copy the features of a statue or engraving, or even of a living face, with some fidelity.

And so it happened that on a certain afternoon in early June, when the sun shone hot and drowsily into my window, I had before me a sheet of drawing paper, and began half idly to draw an imaginary head—a face after the Greek type, turned full towards me. Listlessly I began; and without much thought, having caught the habit of drawing heads in right proportion, I drew the outline; when lo, as I drew, I became aware, slowly and yet startlingly, that I was copying something or some one. How I could be copying with nothing visible before me, I could not then or now explain; but I had all the sensations of following some exact model, of raising my eyes from my own drawing to compare it with the original,

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and of taking minute pains to get the exact expression and shape of the features, processes which were now become so familiar to me.

And then, as the drawing drew near completion, and as I was realising, with an almost awe-struck fluttering of the heart, that the face which my own hands had drawn was that of a more lovely woman than I had ever seen, a face absolutely perfect in its beauty of line, and in its expression of all qualities of goodness and nobleness: then of a sudden there came to me again the air I had played in the school chapel. I dropped my pencil, I flew to the piano, set my trembling hands to the keys, and played.

Yes—the same air came up again out of the thin sweetness of the wires as out of the rich fulness of the organ-pipes. Again I felt the same curious feeling of willlessness, as if I was playing not of my own act, nor out of my own mind. And again, just as before, there came upon me the consciousness of a presence beside me,

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a presence that I knew certainly to be the same girl-spirit I had known before. But I could distinguish, in some inexplicable way, that the four years that had changed me from boy to man, had also changed this girl to woman. She was nearer to me than if she had stood close beside me. I was more conscious of all that she was than if I could have seen or touched her. Her consciousness and mine seemed to mingle for the time in one stream, our sensations to move in unison, our natures to infuse and pervade each other. For I was aware that not only was I influenced by this wondrous being, but—oh ecstasy! that I had the power to influence her in the same way. That just as 'twixt lovers, face to face, looks pass and words, by which they move each other's feelings; so between us passed the waves of emotion, to and fro from one to the other, with no need of thought or touch or utterance, and without the hindrance born of such need.

I know not how long I continued in this trance or vision, my hands playing over

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and over again the same beautiful air, each time with fuller tones and fresh variations. I seemed to be growing in knowledge of this wonderful creature, and in intimacy. I could say of her, She is my friend! in more absolute certainty than of any of my oldest friends. And in the delight of this new friendship, of the alternate exploring of her spirit and laying open to her of mine, which seemed to be going on between us, I took no heed of time or other circumstance. When suddenly a loud knock at my door, followed by the immediate entrance of some one, startled me, and I rose almost staggering from my seat.

"Hullo! old man, what's the matter? I heard you playing the wildest and queerest stuff as I came up—something like Wagner-only-much-more-so. You look as if you'd been playing in your sleep."

The intruder—so at the moment I felt him—was, curiously enough, the same friend as had broken in upon my former dream-music in the school-chapel, Lord St. Denys. Our friendship had ripened and deepened

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with our growth, and we were now at the same college.

I remembered that I had engaged to go on the river with him at five; and being recovered enough to feel anxious to hide from him all I had been feeling, I stretched myself, with a yawn.

"Is it five o'clock? I've been half asleep, I believe, over the piano. I don't wonder you heard some funny music."

Alas! I had forgotten my drawing. I heard an exclamation from him, and turning to the table, saw he had it in his hand.

"By Jove! what's this?"

"What's what?" I said.

"This face—this head?"

"Oh, that's nothing," I said, trying to speak carelessly, but feeling as conscious as a lover, and intensely vexed at his having seen it.

"But where did you get it from?" he persisted.

"Oh, I drew it."

"You drew it! What from?"

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"How do you mean?" I asked. "I simply drew it out of my head."

He stared hard at me, and I suppose I showed some of the uncomfortable consciousness that I was feeling, because he said, half laughing but half vexed—

"That's all rot, old man! Excuse my saying so. But how did you get hold of her photograph? and how did you find out anything about her?"

It was now my turn to ask surprised questions.

"Whose photograph? I really don't know what you mean."

"Do you mean to say you didn't copy that from a photograph of Nephelé Delisle?"

"No," I said. "Who is Nephelé Delisle?"

"Well," he replied, "this is a most extraordinary thing if you didn't. It's precisely like her—a very good likeness."

"But who is she?"

"Why, as I've told you her name I may as well tell you the rest. The fact is I got engaged to her in the winter, but her people and mine don't want it published till I've

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taken my degree. So nobody knows about it, and I keep her photograph carefully locked up—don't even carry it about me for fear of accidents. Do you really mean you haven't somehow found out about this, and copied it for me? By Jove! I believe you must have. Thanks awfully if you did. It's a ripping good picture of her."

I had hard work to convince him that this was not the case; but at last he got so far as to say he'd believe me if he found the photograph hadn't been removed from the place where he left it, and he went off to his room, which was only on the next staircase to me.

He soon came back with a cabinet photograph in his hand.

"Well, I suppose you didn't see *this* photograph," he said, "as it doesn't seem to have been touched, but you *must* have seen another! Just look at them together."

He laid the photograph on the table, by the picture, and the likeness was certainly extraordinary. There was, it is true, a slight difference, almost indefinable, in the

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expression; and the dress, which in my drawing was misty and indefinite, was, in the photograph, a becoming and fashionable modern attire. But otherwise the resemblance was exact, with just the difference which makes, and will always make, an artist's likeness superior to a photograph, the difference of life, and the "something more," which nothing but a sympathetic human touch can lend a picture.

"Now," he said, "the murder's out for both of us! I've had to confess to the engagement, and by drawing this picture you've confessed to knowing Nephel . Tell me when you knew her and where? I don't wonder at your wanting to draw her. But don't tell me she gave you her photograph, because I won't believe it! You got one of some one else's, or remembered one you had seen."

"My good fellow," I said earnestly, "this is a most extraordinary thing; but you must really believe me. I have never to my knowledge seen Miss Delisle, nor a photograph of her; and I drew that face

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simply out of my own head just now before I began playing."

He looked hard at me.

"Will you swear that?" he said.

"Yes," I said; "if you care to ask me to swear it, I will."

"Well," he said, "I can't very well refuse to believe your oath, but this beats any thought - reading or mesmerism I've ever heard of. I can't understand it."

"No more can I," I said to myself.

"At all events," he went on, "you'll give me this picture, won't you? You've managed in a wonderful way to give something there isn't in the photograph. Your picture really brings her before me more than this does."

This was just the request I had been dreading. It was so natural for him to ask—so unnatural (as it seemed) for me to refuse. And yet how could I give up the picture? It had recalled for me that wonderful music; had brought back to me that invisible visitant now dearer to me than all the visible world; had lifted me into the

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rich golden ecstasy of a throbbing first love. Already my eyes were in love with the pictured face, as my soul was with the unseen creature whom the music had invoked, or revealed to me.

Half unconsciously I reached my hand out to the paper. But St. Denys, probably thinking I was going to refuse, hastily snatched at it, meaning to be beforehand with me. We both caught up the paper at the same moment, and it rent asunder right down the beautiful face, and we remained each of us holding a profitless portion.

St. Denys laughed—half triumphantly.

“That settles it!” he said.

And before I thought to stop him, he had plucked the ragged-edged paper out of my hand, and torn the two halves into quarters and eighths and shreds, which he lightly fluttered out of the open window, to be caught and scattered and lost for ever on the losel summer breezes.

CHAPTER III

LORD ST. DENYS apologised for destroying my drawing. He was of an impulsive nature, and I could quite understand a man who was in love with that face doing anything if his jealousy was ever aroused. The loss to me was so great, that I sought instinctively to hide all appearance of feeling, and pretended, as best I could, that I did not mind.

But the incident proved rather a breach in our friendship, though outwardly we never quarrelled; and during the remainder of that summer term we saw less of one another than before.

As the end of the term drew near, he asked me one day if I was going to stay up for Commemoration; and when I answered that I thought I should, he seemed a little put out.

"I thought you never did," he said.

"I never have yet; but I don't know

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why I shouldn't," I answered. "I suppose you will be up for it?"

"Oh yes, I suppose so. I'm one of the stewards of the Freemasons' Ball. But I should think you'd find it precious dull staying up, if you don't care for balls, and haven't any people coming up."

It was evident that he rather hoped I was not going to stay up; and it flashed across my mind that possibly Nephelé Delisle was coming to Oxford for Commemoration.

I was in a most curious state of feeling with regard to this unknown, and yet (as I thought) so well-known, being.

Since the day of the destruction of the picture I had had no recurrence of the vision, or trance, or whatever I can call it. I had in vain attempted to draw the face again, or to recall the melody with which it was in such a strange way associated.

But in my own mind I did not doubt that the personality of whom I had been conscious—whom I had, so to speak, evoked by music—had an objective existence in the world, and was that very Nephelé Delisle

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to whom Lord St. Denys declared he was engaged.

But here came in the strangest part of my feeling in the matter. Though to him, or to any dispassionate person, it must have seemed that he was the rightful authorised lover, and I a base unjustified rival and intruder, to my feeling it was exactly the reverse. Had I not known, beyond the power of external looks or words to show, her very heart of hearts, and she mine? How was it possible for her to be soul's mate to any other than me? I would not, could not, did not believe it. And I felt a calm triumphant assurance that the time was near when we should meet face to face, and that even at our first meeting our spirits would be drawn together as irresistibly as the mist-drops come together to make the rain-drop.

The very thought that she might be coming to Oxford sent a thrill and a throb through all my veins. But how could she be coming? Hardly on St. Denys' invitation, if, as he said, their en-

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gagement was to be kept a secret. On whose then?

I got down my Oxford Calendar, and found there was a Delisle an undergraduate at one of the colleges. And then I suddenly remembered that St. Denys had of late often gone out to dine at that college with some friend whose name I had not heard.

A day or two later I passed him in the street, walking with a man I did not know. They were so deep in conversation they did not notice me, and I heard St. Denys say—

“Then you’ll want four tickets for the Masonic?”

“Yes,” was the answer.

“You’re sure Miss Delisle is coming?” St. Denys went on.

“Quite sure. I’ve set my heart on it, and Nephel  has too; and when that’s the case in the family, the thing is considered a physical necessity.”

He laughed, with a light assurance too pleasant to be called conceit, and they passed out of hearing.

It was evident that I should have not only

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to stay up for Commemoration, but to go to the Masonic Ball. For that I should have to get a ticket. Fortunately I knew another of the stewards, and I at once went to him and asked for one.

“Why didn’t you get it out of Lord St. Denys?” he laughed, as I paid for it. “He’s a steward, and might have let you have it cheap!”

As to what would happen at the ball, how I should ever get introduced to Miss Delisle, or how conduct myself in this flagrant attempt to cut out my friend—of all this I hardly thought at all. My whole mind was intoxicated with the idea of seeing her, the rest would be as it would.

Fortune fought on my side.

Though I did not see much of St. Denys, I could not help noticing when we did meet a suppressed excitement, which increased as the end of the term drew near. Indeed it was evident to every one. He was louder and more boisterous, and his ringing laugh could be heard all over the college more often than usual.

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The last night of the term there was a big supper. One or two wealthy men were leaving, and our boat had gone up four places, so they gave a joint supper to nearly the whole college.

The younger dons were invited, and all passed decorously enough; but after the supper St. Denys and a few others went off to another man's rooms, and there, it seems, after a game of loo or nap, a bowl of punch was brewed, and they all drank too much.

Anyhow, at about three or four o'clock in the morning there was such a row in the Quadrangle, that I got up and looked out at the staircase window (my rooms faced the other way), and saw in the beautiful fresh summer morning a group of four or five unsteady men, in dress clothes and college "blazers," standing on the grass plot in the Quadrangle, and throwing stones with wildish aim at the college clock. Lord St. Denys was conspicuous among them.

The stones went wide of their object, and first one and then another hit the windows

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of the library, which was below the clock. And then I heard St. Denys shout—

“Let’s break the whole lot, and let a little air into the musty old books!”

They were in the midst of their occupation, when I heard a window open near me, and almost directly after one of the men shouted—

“By Jove, there’s the Dean!”

There was an instantaneous stampede. The party scattered this way and that, and I returned to my bed, wondering what would happen next day.

By the middle of the day the fate of the culprits was known throughout the college.

Lord St. Denys, who was in a tremendous way about it, gave this account of what had happened to him.

The Master had sent for him, and began at once—“Lord St. Denys, you had intended remaining in Oxford during Commemoration week, I believe? Had you any friends coming specially for this occasion?” St. Denys admitted that he had. “Then,” intimated the Master, pleasantly, “I think it will be

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as well that you should ask some or other of your Oxford acquaintance to entertain them on your behalf, as I must request you to be good enough to leave Oxford this afternoon." Lord St. Denys himself was furious, and declared it the meanest trick he had ever heard of. But considering the offence, most of the men thought he had got off very lightly, and that the Master had neatly contrived to inflict a punishment which, while most effectively disagreeable at the moment, was not so serious as rustication for the next term, which was the sentence passed on the others concerned in the row, men whose general character was not so good as Lord St. Denys'.

It was not to me, but to another friend, that this account had been given.

"Do you know whom St. Denys is expecting?" I asked.

"No; he didn't say. I thought you'd know probably, as you're a pal of his. He hasn't taken the Master's advice, and handed them over to you?"

"Not to me," I answered quietly. "I don't fancy they are any of his own people,

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but somebody else's, whom he was going to help entertain."

I had rather kept out of St. Denys' way till I knew he was gone. He had never said anything more to me about my staying up; and I had almost hoped now that he would not find out I was going to. But Joyce went on—

"By the way, the poor old fellow seemed quite aggrieved at any one staying up, as he could not. He actually said he thought it was ridiculous of a man like you, who didn't care for dancing, to stay up."

"What did you say?"

"I said I happened to know you were going to the Masonic Ball; and that was the strange part of it. St. Denys seemed mad at this, and actually used bad language, which he don't generally do."

Joyce was a good fellow, but fortunately a very dull one, and not inquisitively inclined to speculate as to the reason of St. Denys' behaviour. He was also going down that evening; so there would be no chance of his seeing anything that would enlighten him.

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So I said to myself: and then I turned round on my own phrase: "*Seeing anything?*—but what should there be to see?" And to that question I could find no answer, but in a quickened pulse, as I lost myself in an endless El Dorado of golden daydreams.

CHAPTER IV

It was the night of the Masonic Ball.

The hour was at hand—so I fancied—to which my whole life hitherto had been but as a walk through weary antechambers.

How the day had passed I could not have told even then: much less can I tell now. I had been in that state of mind which it is so impossible to describe to any who have not experienced it, which sounds so foolish, so unreal, so extravagant, when written of in the verse of young poets, the anticipation which soars so high in ether that the mind trembles at times for fear the consummation should, after all, be lower.

And yet through all I had an almost calm feeling of security—of certainty—that the being whom I had known so strangely in trance would prove in life just as I had known her.

I arrived early at the ball, and found few

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people were yet there—no one that I knew. I had never been much given to ball-going; and when I found myself in the large lighted hall without a person to speak to, I suddenly realised, what I had not before thought of, that to be at a ball, knowing nobody to dance with or even to speak to, is one of the most depressing situations in the world.

I watched anxiously as group after group of people entered, but not one person did I know; and so far I did not see a single undergraduate with whom I had even a nodding acquaintance. In my own college there were few dancing men; and they were just those who had been sent down.

The music began, and the dancing. Pair after pair went by me, and I felt more and more alone and “out of it.”

I kept near the entrance door, hailing with expectant eyes every person who came in; but as time passed, and the one person I was looking for did not come, a new fear, born partly of my forlornness, came over me. What if, after all, Nephel  Delisle should

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not be in Oxford, or not coming to the ball?

And then, just as the darkness of this fear became almost a visible blackness before my eyes, I looked, and lo! through the looped curtains that framed the doorway came a lady all in white, young and tall and royal; and my heart gave a great throb, for the face—calm as a Greek goddess, spiritual as a maid Madonna, beautiful as the World's Desire—was the face that I knew so well, and had longed for so hopelessly.

I do not think I made any exclamation or movement; but even if I had it might have passed unnoticed, since she had hardly entered the hall, when every one, except those actually dancing, was looking at her.

She seemed quite unconscious that she was attracting such attention. There had come in with her, besides an elder lady, who was evidently acting *chaperon*, her brother and another undergraduate. This fortunate second man became in two minutes the best envied man in the room; as almost immediately Miss Delisle and he—finding

Nephelée

a waltz had only just begun—paired off together, and joined the dancers in the middle of the room.

With mingled feelings I watched them. They both danced well, and she with a certain liquid rhythm which a poet of the last century would have ascribed to her having been used to the motion of wings. Her movements seemed like an added note in the music, almost as if some beautiful voice was singing the air.

And greatly as I could have desired the high rapture of dancing with her, I felt no jealousy of her partner. That he was deeply moved and thrilled with the effluence of her beauty, was evident. But while she talked with him, smiled at him, leaned on his arm, there was some indescribable quality of self-reservation in her manner which made me glad in my heart that it was not I who was being so talked with, smiled at, and leaned upon. Had it been I—and I so much in love as I was—I felt I could have gone out then and there, and flung myself over Folly Bridge.

Nephelé

I have seen other women with this quality of manner—perfect ease and naturalness, and yet no single moment's self-surrender ; but never any one who had it so wonderfully as Nephelé Delisle.

But if to my jealous-lover's state of mind there was this momentary satisfaction, it vanished the next instant in a sudden agony of disappointment. For, as the pair came down the room in their second turn round, I managed to get a little in front of the onlookers, and for one moment Miss Delisle's eyes met mine. Mine were fixed on her as on an old but long unseen friend, whose glance you know will be followed by glad and smiling recognition. Alas! there came no such recognition. A slight consciousness, it is true, I could perceive—a moment's second look and very faint flush of her cheek, but only (I felt despondingly sure) because of my eager and audacious stare. She turned away, and though she came the same way again twice, nay thrice, her eyes were never turned again to me.

Nephelé

There are blows and disappointments the most lasting in effect, which yet at the time one hardly realises. The physical nature seems often indeed more quick than the moral in taking in the full meaning of some great crisis. I felt that I turned pale, that I was trembling all over, and could hardly walk steadily to a friendly wall to lean against, while at the same time I was almost unconsciously making up explanations to myself for this non-recognition. It was easy indeed to find a thousand, in the vague unknown conditions of the dream-world in which my acquaintance with this beautiful creature had begun and ripened. That her spirit had had communion with mine (how empty and half cant-like sound these words, but the right meaning is, or was once, in them!) I felt absolutely sure. But why should it follow that she should know my outward appearance? I knew hers from my own drawing. How little likely was it that she should have reproduced my face in the way I had hers!

And then I tried to imagine that her

Nephelée

moment's second look at me, and the hardly perceptible flush on her face, had meant something, perhaps an unconscious or half-conscious recognition, or at all events some first beginning of interest, which would quickly deepen when once I had speech with her. Perhaps the full revelation might come could I once play to her! And with this thought came the remembrance of my musical powers, and gave me again a feeling of support and strength. Here, surely, I had an irresistible spell. This was the language which must—in the outward world as in the inward—reveal the kinship of our souls.

So I dreamed and dreamed in a little cloud-land of my own, while the dancing and the laughter and the music murmured round. And yet for all my reasoning and dreaming my pulse would not grow less rapid, nor my face feel of its natural colour, till I had stood there a long, long time. And when at last I tried to walk, I found my step was still unsteady; and suddenly I determined to go home. It is very strange,

Nephelé

I thought, how slight a shock can upset one sometimes! I shall be all right in my room, and

At this point I must have fainted and fallen, for my next knowledge was of sitting up on the floor, supported by two undergraduates—strangers to me—and with a glass of champagne held to my lips.

I heard a man's voice offering a man's natural explanation — "Been dancing too much after supper;" and then a soft voice, with a thrill of incommunicable womanhood in it, reply—"No, he wasn't dancing. Perhaps he's been working too hard."

I opened my eyes, and met the eyes of Nephelé Delisle.

What my eyes expressed I do not know—I was hardly master of myself or of them at the moment. But she lowered her lashes, with a hardly perceptible blush.

I was rapidly getting better, and I now saw that it was her brother who was ministering to me chiefly. With his help I got up, and he saw me safely into a cab, and actually to the gates of my own college before he left me.

CHAPTER V

WHAT a night I passed !

I fell asleep at once, and slept soundly enough, in so far that I was conscious of no outward sounds or sights. But I lived a life-time in dreams that night, and when I awoke I hardly knew if they had been dreams of terror or dreams of rapture. I felt that I had been in another world, and a world whose queen and centre and whole significance was Nephelée, as Beatrice was in Dante's waking vision.

So strong was this sense of coming out of another world, that the little ordinary necessities of life seemed strange and unwonted. I had to think seriously before I remembered to tie my neck-tie; and to make my tea and eat my breakfast seemed quite new and unusual actions.

I found that I was very late; and when I had finished breakfast and went out for

Nephelé

a turn in our beautiful college gardens, the morning was more than half over.

It was a brilliant June morning; the scarlet may, the laburnums, the lilacs, were in their glory, and the snowy swans on the blue water of the Pool, centring the vague joy of the morning on a single spot of vivid beauty, seemed like the poet's touch that sets all nature's loveliness moving round human sympathies.

I was walking dreamily along the path by the waterside, drinking in the delicious morning through all the gates of sense, when I heard voices near, and looking up, saw three figures approaching; and with a sudden flutter of pulse, a sudden uplifting as if on real airy wings, I knew that one of the three was the Sibyl of my cave of dreams, Nephelé Delisle. With her were her brother, and another lady, whom I knew well enough by sight, though not to speak to. She was rather notorious among the undergraduates by the nickname of Mrs. Leo Hunter, being the wife of a distinguished professor, and, as she fondly fancied,

Nephelé

the leader of fashionable society in the university.

The brother and sister recognised me at once, and stopped to inquire if I was all right again. Both spoke with real concern, but the sister with some added vibration of sympathy, conscious or unconscious, that came upon me with a virtue as healing and vitalising as that of a master melody on a spirit in pain.

Then Mrs. Hunter begged to be introduced to me. She asked if I knew Lord St. Denys of my college; and when I said that he was my chief friend, she became very gracious indeed, and remarked how fortunate they were to have met me. Could I spare the time to take them round the gardens and the college?

And so for two blissful hours I was with Nephelé — with her, visible, with whom, invisible, I had held commune so close, so intimate. And yet she seemed to know nothing of it. Sweet she was, gracious, divine, and withal open of heart, but only as to a first acquaintance, not (as

Nephel 

I felt to her) as to an old and intimate friend.

And yet, once and again, as I lingered with her one moment behind the others, to point to a gleam of rippled reflection in the water, or to listen to the rich warble of a blackbird, who lived, my friend of friends, in a bush beneath the very windows of my room, she turned her eyes on me with a sudden puzzled glance—a sort of half recognition, that made my heart throb, and re-awoke in me the confidence that I felt when I first saw her, the confidence that this and none other was she whose spirit had visited my spirit in a dream of music, as angels visit sleeping children.

At last she said, in those liquid tones of hers, “It is very strange, but I feel every now and then as we are talking as if I had known you before somewhere. I suppose it is that you remind me of some one else; but I cannot remember who.”

“I could tell you how it is,” I said softly, “if I might.”

I suppose she saw too much meaning in

Nephelé

my words—my whole soul, with all its love, was in them—for she said rather hurriedly,

“Oh, you mean because you are a great friend of Lord St. Denys. You know I am engaged to him? Of course you are sure to have caught the same sort of expressions and ways of looking at things.”

And then, in a woman's way, she drew me on to speak of him; and I, for all my wounded spirit, spoke warmly, as a friend should speak. For he was a fine and noble-hearted man; and there was that in her which drew true words from the lips, even when talk was lightest, as the magnet draws iron out of the dust.

And so the hours ran out, and we came at last to the college gates, where I must needs say good-bye. And I felt a sick forlornness of soul that I strove for very manhood's sake to keep from my look and from my eyes. But when, oh when, should I walk with her or be with her again? And if my friend held really such a place in her heart, what room was there in it for me?

Then all in a moment hope, that lay

Nephel 

a-dying, leapt up again in eager life; for Mrs. Hunter was asking me to come that evening to an "at home" at her house.

"Miss Delisle has brought her violin and is going to give us a treat. I daresay you didn't know that she is a wonderful player."

"Oh, not wonderful," said Nephel , laughing, "only well taught."

"Well, I think that our poor Oxford taste will find it wonderful," replied Mrs. Hunter. "Dr. — himself is anxious to hear you, and has promised to accompany you. It is so difficult to find any one who can play well enough for you."

"How terrible!" laughed Nephel . "Then I must get back and practise at once."

So with the hopeful *Au revoir*, instead of the despairing Farewell, I saw them go. And then I went to pass the afternoon in dreaming on the river, where the willow-herb and forget-me-nots bent over their mirrored images, and the bright water ran swiftly over green waving rushes and clear gravelly sands.

Dreaming in new hope; for I thought now that I saw full explanation of the past

Nephelé

and fair pathway for the future. Nephelé was a lover of music—was a violin player. Here lay the key to the mystery. Surely she, even as I, had the nature that can be uplifted by the spell of music clean away from the clutch and tyranny of the physical brain. And surely by some unknown pathway, through some unexplained instinct, our two spirits, twins in the music world, had met and communed with one another in those two wide-sundered hours that stood as golden dates in my life's memories.

How this should be, I knew not then, I know not now. All old explanations I hold but myths and shadows. They are dear to me as honest seekings after a great and elusive truth. But I cannot think that any one has yet found in human language, or in human thought, that is built out of language, any symbol that in the least degree approaches the true statement of that which is best known, according to our present standpoint, as Telepathic Consciousness. Phrases one must use to be understood at all; and the phrase I have used above shall

Nephel 

stand, little as I think it expresses the reality. Our two spirits had met and communed by some elective affinity born of our love of music. Or was our love of music born of *this*, of some deeper, inmost affinity of soul?

Such were the dreams I dreamed that drowsy afternoon, under the June sky, floating on the gentle water. And deep, swift, full consolation poured into my soul, to heal it from the wound—the almost deadly wound—that last night it had received, when first I had sought my twin spirit in visible human eyes, and met no recognition.

CHAPTER VI

THE evening came—a pure, soft, starry evening of June, with pale light of the passed day lingering in the northward sky.

I walked out to Mrs. Hunter's house—by this name let me call the lady, the few times I shall have to name her at all. There I found the rooms crowded with people I had never seen—the most notable Oxford folk, and the most fashionable of the visitors.

There were several rooms, all pretty full of people; and it was some time before I saw Nephelée or her brother. At last I caught sight of her afar off, the centre of an admiring group, the queen of one room; and I saw it was hopeless to think of getting near her then. Even her brother did not see me, though I had a distant glimpse of him over other people's heads; and I remained unnoticed, friendless, soli-

Nephel 

tary in the sociable crowd. And my soul, that had opened under the sunshine of that happy morning in the garden, shrank and closed itself like a flower in rain. Again I felt the terrible isolation I had felt the night before at the ball, the sense of a dead man come back to a world that does not want him or care about him. Again I found a quiet spot where, leaning on the wall, I brooded in a valley of dark shadows, and saw grisly shapes, unconscious of the hum of talk, the laughter, the brightness all about me.

Only one thing kept me from slipping off home in bitterness of soul—the longing to hear Nephel  play. That would surely bring some balm to my spirit. Perhaps I even dared to dream of some interchange of thought with her by that subtle medium. Might not her hands have the power I had found in mine, to break down all that lay between our innermost spirits, and lend them communicable thought? But moments slipped by, and it grew later and later, and still there was no sign of movement to

Nephelée

the room where the piano was. And then it happened that the hostess herself, passing my way, was addressed by some one with the very question I was longing to put to her, "When are we to hear Miss Delisle?"

"Oh, I am so sorry," was the reply, "Miss Delisle will not be able to play to-night, as I cannot find any one who will venture to accompany her. Dr. — sent word at the last minute that he was prevented from coming; and I could not get another pianist. Poor Miss Delisle! I fancy she is secretly relieved. Fancy playing to all this crowd! and I don't think any of them care much for music—except you, of course."

"Yes," replied the man; "I care very much. I wish I was not such a poor performer myself, and could offer my services."

That was all. It trembled on my lips to offer myself as accompanist; but shyness, diffidence, embarrassment, kept me back, and Mrs. Hunter passed on. Again and again I wished I had offered, but there came no second opportunity; and at last,

Nephel 

feeling all hope was over, with a sort of suicide's determination, I moved to the door to go home. I brushed rather roughly past some obstructing men, one of whom, turning round, proved to be Delisle.

"Hullo," he said; "are you off?"

"Yes," I said. "I only came to hear your sister play, and I find she's not going to."

"No," he said, unmoved by my almost rude speech. "It's a great shame. Several people have said the same. Nephel  is in rather a way about it. She knows that a good many people really came to hear her play, like you; and she hates disappointing them. But our hostess, it seems, cares very little about music herself, and has taken no trouble at all to find any one to accompany her. I hardly know any one here—do you? I must say they don't look a very musical lot. But I can hardly believe there isn't a musician among the whole crowd."

"Does your sister really want to play?" I asked softly.

Nephel 

“Yes; I believe she does really very much. You see, she’s reached a stage when nervousness and that sort of thing is quite gone, and she rather enjoys playing to a mixed lot of people. She says it is very interesting to try and try again till you force some musical excitement out of a set of unmusical people.”

“Do you think she would let me accompany her?”

“You? Do you play?” he asked.

“Yes, a little.”

“But——” he hesitated.

“Oh,” I answered, rather drily, “I know what is wanted. I shouldn’t offer if I thought I should make a mess of it; or disfigure Miss Delisle’s playing.”

“I beg your pardon,” he replied, “I might have known that. Come along; let’s go to her!”

He pulled me after him through the crowd, till we reached his sister.

“Look here, Neph,” he began; “Mr. Gerard wants to know if you will play with him?”

Nephel 

“If you will let me accompany you, rather,” I said.

“Oh yes, gladly, if you really will,” she replied. “I felt sure you could, if you would.”

“How could you have known that?” asked her brother, laughing.

“Oh,” she replied, smiling, “we musical people have a lot of freemasonry, and recognise each other by instinct.”

“That’s why you avoid the bit of rudeness I was guilty of,” he said, “and don’t express any doubt as to Mr. Gerard’s powers. But if you knew, why didn’t you ask him before?”

She did not answer. It seemed a simple and natural question; and there were many simple and natural answers, any one of which I expected her to make; that she hadn’t seen me in the room; that Mrs. Hunter doubted if I could play. But she made no answer, and looking up at her I saw she was looking slightly confused and blushing slightly. That was all. But all who have been lovers will remember heaven-high hopes

Nephel 

builded all in a moment on foundations as frail as these. Yet my thoughts at that moment were not quite the ordinary lover's; the hope that framed itself in me was not the dazzling audacity, "She loves me!" Rather, as she answered not, I felt a flood of serene strength and knowledge. For this was the first firm sign that she too felt a bond between our spirits. That coming, all else would come.

She sent her brother to tell Mrs. Hunter that an accompanist had been found, while she went herself to fetch her violin, refusing the many offers made to fetch it for her; and I made my way to the drawing-room where the piano was.

Soon I heard Mrs. Hunter proclaiming the news on all sides. "So glad. Miss Delisle's brother has found some one to play for her." And as she came nearer, I caught her laughing "aside." "I hope he can play. Rather audacious to offer, don't you think?" And several others seemed to think the same.

That I did not mind. Like Miss Delisle, in my own department of performance, I

Nephelée

had passed the stage of nervousness and diffidence.

She came up with her violin.

"Where is your music?" asked one of the men. "Shall I get it for you?"

"No, thank you; I play without music."

"But your accompanist will want some."

"Isn't it here?" she said, looking round the piano. "I sent it to Dr. —— to look at, as he was going to accompany me. Hasn't he sent it back?"

It was soon found that he had not, and a murmur of disappointment rose from all around at this fresh difficulty.

For a moment I was taken aback. I had done very little violin accompanying, and knew hardly any scores. One only, that I had lately played with a friend, came to my mind. It was a duet of Beethoven's, for violin and piano, which I had had some difficulty in mastering, and therefore remembered pretty accurately.

I turned to Miss Delisle.

"Do you play Beethoven's sonata in —?"
I asked.

Nephelée

"Yes," she said. "How did you guess? It was the very piece I was going to play to-night as my principal piece."

"Then I think I can accompany you without notes," I said.

I laid my fingers on the piano to give her the A. It was a good piano, in good tune. I felt I could do my best on it, and I ran up and down in a score of modulations, bringing out the four violin notes, as she tuned her strings.

"Ah!" she cried, "delicious! This is worth living for, to be accompanied with a touch like that."

Sweet, sweet praise from sweet, sweet lips! Shall I ever forget the thrill it gave me?

Then we began.

You remember that in Beethoven's sonata in —, the pianist plays the air first, a quiet, gentle, strong air, like the June notes of a blackbird; then the violin takes up the same air, while the piano subsides into the lower place, and gives broken fragments and flashes back to the violin melodies, as

Nephelé

rippling water reflects broken fragments of the moonlight.

But oh, that air as she played it! I had put my whole self soul into it as I played it in prelude; and she answered me, cry for cry, soul to soul, agony to agony, I had almost said love to love. But love was not in that music: the vision of love, the dream, the hope, the splendour of love, were there; but love itself was some Paradise beyond, to which that music was uplifting the dwellers on a lower world.

And this was what we played:—I, in the piano part, had wakened some lovely immortal out of a charmed sleep, wakened her with a song sung lightly, in gaiety of heart, the mellifluous lip-song of a minstrel-poet, who sings of passion he has fancied but not felt. She, in the violin part, had caught up my own song and flung it back to me with a new meaning, no more as a light love-lyric, but as a high principle of life, the cadenced code of a Heaven whose laws are Love. This dreaming goddess-plaything I had so idly wakened, proved for me a most dread,

Nephelée

yet most beautiful, spirit of lofty and imperious monition. And the music became an unceasing warfare; at first the struggling of my sluggard soul, reluctant to slough its poet-dreams and go forth to the world of action, yet slowly won by the nobler instincts of its own nature echoing to the noble call; till I arose, armed and ready and resolved, and went as Barak inspired by Deborah, to do great deeds and endure great sorrows, and attain at last to splendid death or splendid victory—which, the music told not, for music knows no difference between this crown and that.

All this we lived through in the playing of that wonderful music. And she felt it even as I did—felt it, spoke it, thrilled with it, throbbed with it. It was a duet in a sense that no music was ever a duet before—a duet of soul answering to soul, speaking a language ready phrased, yet speaking it as the expression of their own inmost thought.

Ah, that it could last! But if there is a Purgatory that leads up to Heaven, there is the converse, a Liberty of Heaven that

Nephelé

leads down to Hell. All lovers know it—
I most of all.

It could not last. The close grew nearer
and nearer, and at last, in exquisite accord
of movement and tone and dying gradations,
our hands came to rest.

I could not look up—I felt hardly myself.
I was dimly conscious of a hush, that was
a fuller testimony even than the tempest of
applause that followed. Also I was con-
scious that Nephelé was under much the
same spell as I was, that she was motionless
beside me, hardly attentive to all the plaudits
and congratulations poured into her ear.

Slowly the outside world became real
again, and I looked up; and for one
moment met her eyes, and for one moment
drank the liquidest sympathy ever poured
from eye to eye. Then we both looked
away, and I distinguished what people were
saying.

“How wonderful!” “Finer than Ne-
ruda.” “Such sympathy.” “It drew me
as near as a toucher.”

There was Mrs. Hunter bustling up.

Nephel 

“Oh, Miss Delisle, you must play us something more! It is quite wonderful! Every one says so. Do play something more!”

Nephel  turned to me.

“I am afraid it depends more on Mr. Gerard than on me, as I have no music here, and he has to accompany me by heart. Do you know anything else as well as this?”

“Nothing as well,” I said; “indeed I fear I could hardly venture on any other piece. I happen to have played that sonata quite lately.”

She ran over a number of names, but I had to say No to each. At last she said aside to me—

“Would you venture on an experiment? Shall we try the audience with an improvisation?”

“Do you think we could manage it?” I returned.

“Yes, if you will play an air, I think I can pick it up after you, and follow your lead in a few variations, provided they are comparatively simple.”

Nephel 

And then there happened a wonderful thing. For while I was hesitating a moment, waiting for some melody to suggest itself to my brain or my fingers, suddenly there came over me the full memory of the air I had played twice before, on those memorable days when I had first known in the spirit-world the girl now standing by me. And I began to play it.

Once I played it through, the soft, strong, subtle, dulcet melody, that seemed, now I knew her, to be the very expression of this girl-creature by me.

Then she took it up on her fiddle-strings—firmly, fully, unfalteringly—and she too played it through once; and as I wound an accompaniment in and out and around her strong delicious notes, I felt through me, and through and through me, the old feeling of spirit-converse with the unknown, unseen, glorious girl-spirit I had known before. Only now she stood beside me, and the joy, the delight, the rapture, were tenfold increased.

And then, just as I was yielding myself

Nephelée

to this feeling, and beginning to lead her into such innermost musical communion as I had before held with her, snap—her E string had broken.

Was it an accident? The hot room would account for it. But was it an accident? Or had some half-involuntary violence of hers done it? Had she, in her maidenhood, resented, resisted, this intimacy?

Alas! the dream was over for the time. She turned half abruptly, half apologetically, round to Mrs. Hunter—

“I am very sorry. That’s the end, you see!”

“Haven’t you another E string?” I ventured to ask, but she paid no heed to me.

As before, there were many voices complimenting her, one or two of the compliments including me. One man—the music-loving man to whom Mrs. Hunter had spoken before—came up to me, and began speaking most warmly of the improvisation, of the extraordinary sympathy with which we had managed to fit in with one another, and of the strange beauty of the air.

Nephel 

“It is very delicate, very elusive. I can generally catch an air pretty readily, but I cannot get more than the merest impression of this. Would you mind playing it once again?”

I put my fingers to the keys to begin, when Miss Delisle, who was standing with her back to us, turned quickly round.

“Please don’t play it again!” she said imperiously, and moved swiftly away up to her brother.

Almost immediately afterwards I heard them saying their farewells to Mrs. Hunter, and before I could reach them they were gone—gone!

The man beside me had heard the sharp command, and looked astonished, but he said nothing.

I soon took my leave, and walked home in a tumult of thought. Why, I repeated to myself again and again, why was I not to play that air again? Ah, Nephel ! is it that you still resist the knowledge that you are mine—that we are one? Ah, sweet, maidenly Nephel ! think you that you can

Nephel 

escape me? Have I not in this air a spell to command your spirit when I wish, where-soever your body may be? Yes! I will once again compel you, dear struggling captive! You shall, only for a few moments, speak with me yet again this night!

I reached my rooms, opened the piano, laid my fingers on the keys to begin the spell-like melody, and lo! it would not come! It was gone from me again as hopelessly as before! I was a magician without his wand—tricked, cheated, beaten, where I had meant to be a captor. And as I remembered that I had no more prospect of meeting Nephel , no hope of speaking with her, no power to move her, I laid my arms in a reckless crash on the keyboard, and wept and wept, as I had not wept since manhood dried the fount of my boyhood's tears.

CHAPTER VII

THE morning came, chilly with wind and rain. I made one more vain effort to recapture the lost melody, and then began to pack my things for going down. I knew—I forget how—that the Delisles, brother and sister, were leaving Oxford that day. I had a faint half-hope I might find them traveling by the same train as I did. Indeed, I purposely let one train go while I stood on the platform, to get one more chance by waiting for the next. But all in vain. I found myself being carried away from all hope; and in a semi-stupor tried to face life as it looks to the world again, and put aside my dreams.

I have no clear recollection of that long vacation. I pulled myself together somehow, enough to work very hard, for I was to go in for my Mus. Bac. before Christmas; and I remember dimly working on and on

Nephelé

without much feeling, much as a galley slave works, or a man on a tread-mill. I was in a remote part of Wales, and heard nothing of any Oxford or other news.

When the October term began I went up to Oxford, and in spite of my resolutions—for I had made many between despair and pride—I found my heart beating quicker, and my brain weaving a thousand schemes or fantasies whereby I might again meet Nephelé Delisle. Should I not hear of her from Lord St. Denys? Might I not find her address by chance if he wrote to her? Might she not be coming again to Oxford?

And yet these were but the idlest dreams. I did not intentionally dwell on them, but rather tried to banish them, and to fix my mind entirely on my approaching examination and my after career.

Lord St. Denys came up with the rest of the college and greeted me warmly, even affectionately, as of old, and began almost at once to speak of Miss Delisle.

“Nephelé told me she had seen you, and found out you and I were friends; and she

Nephelé

told me of your accompanying her, and said she had never been so well accompanied in her life. Doesn't she play well?"

"Yes, wonderfully," I answered, not without an effort of self-restraint. "It was a great delight to play with her."

"If I take my degree this term," he continued, "we're to be married in February, and get abroad for a bit in March. I've been reading pretty hard in the Long, and ought to pass all right, I think. By Jove, with such a prize for success, it's enough to make the laziest fellow turn to and grind."

I shut back an iron gate on my clamouring feelings, and quietly led him on to talk about Miss Delisle.

We were in my rooms, late at night, and he was unusually frank, friendly, and intimate. He told me his whole heart's history, and how he had first met Nephelé, and how he had first dared hope she loved him. And as he spoke of his love for her, his fine honest face lit up, and he became almost a different being from the riding, rowing, cricketing man I knew. Not that he had

Nephelé

not always had another side, and many finer tastes and feelings. But he had the reserve of his caste; and even to me had never laid his innermost self so bare before.

Every word was like a stab in my heart. This, I thought, is no light boyish love that can be diverted or treated as nothing. It is a deep true passion to be reckoned with. Only—and this is the all in all—does Nephelé love him really? My mind was drifting off in this way even as he was speaking, when as a sort of answer to my unspoken thought I heard him saying—

“Do you remember last term, the picture you drew, and how it got torn?”

“Yes,” I said, “I remember it well.”

“Do you know,” he went on, half blushing, “I was a great fool about that. I didn’t know Nephelé so well then as I do now; and though she had plighted her love to me, I didn’t feel sort of absolutely secure. And—don’t be angry with me, old fellow—I was really absurd enough to feel jealous of your having her picture, and I didn’t want you to stay up to Commem. and see

Nephel 

her. I knew how musical she is; and I thought, like an idiot, that there would be some sort of musical sympathy between you and her, if you ever met. Now I know that was all rot. She has told me—but there, I can't tell you about that, it's too sacred to me. But I am as sure of her love as I am of the love of my mother," he said seriously. "All the same she took to you very much, and spoke most warmly of you. There," he ended, with a sigh of relief, "I wanted to say that to you, and now it's said. And now we're as good friends as ever we were, and when we're married you will come and stay with us, won't you, and accompany Nephel  again?"

I said I would, while a red-hot iron seared and numbed my heart, and with a sudden grasp of the hand he left me. My friend—my friend—a friend worthy of much sacrifice, of much self-obliteration!

I swore I would be loyal to him. I shrank from the vow as from putting fire to my own flesh; but I swore it before God, on my knees. Whatever secret, mysterious

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tie there was between Nephelé and me, or between some inmost spirit of her and of me, I swore that I would seek after nothing more; and that whatever measure of her heart and love he had—and I could not doubt that he had much—I would look upon as settled and sealed and sacred. That some deeper or higher measure of her love might have been mine—ay, was mine, if I could claim it in the waking world as I had known it in the world of dream—I doubted not. But it was plain, I thought, that of this she had herself no suspicion; that she looked on those moments in which her dreams had been one with mine as vain, idle, unreal; and thought, in all the honesty of her crystal soul, that she was giving to this fine and noble-hearted lover a full-hearted love.

I rose from my knees with my heart drained of all its life-blood, but with the peace of a good conscience before God and before man, and, with trembling limbs and beaded forehead, took out my books to do my evening's work. I found I could do nothing of it;

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and after several vain attempts, gave it up and went to bed.

I did not know that I slept. I thought that I tossed and turned and could not sleep; and yet I found afterwards that I must have slept deeper than I knew. For suddenly I woke—woke to find myself not in my bed, but sitting up at the writing-table in my other room. I had my night-things on, as if I had walked straight from my bed in my sleep. The morning had come, and the sun was shining outside, making the red window-curtains crimson transparencies. Two candles were lighted before me; I had a pencil in my hand, and was actually, when I woke, putting a finishing touch to a drawing; and the drawing was the drawing I had made once before, the likeness of Nephelé Delisle—not, strange to say, as I had seen her in life, but just as I had drawn her before, with some ethereal touch that in life slept for me, perhaps for all—some added divine air which perhaps no eyes, not even mine, might ever see in her actual face.

All that I have written I took in in the

Nephelé

tithe of a second, as the mind takes in what concerns it deeply. I heard the noise of my scout outside the door, and knew that it was his unlocking the "oak," or outer door, that had awakened me. I seized the drawing, hastily thrust it into a portfolio of drawings, and went into my bedroom again. The candles I left burning, and I heard the scout, coming in, make some exclamation, and then blow them out. He probably thought that I had been sitting up very late, and forgotten to put them out.

I lay in bed trembling with excitement, and trying to picture what could have happened. The dual self, which is observed in cases of sleep-walking and hypnotism, had in my case never been divided before, or brought into contradictory action. But now it was plain that while my usual self—to use easy words—had, under the impulse of a conscientious resolve, been passing a night of weary wretchedness, the other self, or "subliminal consciousness," had once more experienced the dream of Nephelé, and reproduced on paper her face. Had

Nephelé

I not been awakened I should probably have next gone on to play on the piano the Nephelé air, and to meet her again in the musical dream world.

And as I thought this, there came over me, with sudden intoxication, the conviction that with that face before me I could reproduce at will the divine melody that was the spell between her spirit and me—could at will force her spirit, wherever her body might be, to hold intimate communion with mine. My heart throbbed, my pulses beat in tempest. I sprang from my bed to bathe and dress and rush to my piano to try the charm.

The fresh wholesome chill of the cold water of my bath woke a new feeling—a feeling that I fought against with actual physical movements of set teeth and strained muscles, but that yet returned anew, and overbore resistance, and conquered—conquered, thank God! as I now can say. Then, I could not: then, the victory of conscience—conscience which told me that to seek again that spirit-intercourse would be to break the vow I had made a few hours

Nephelé

before — brought me only a relaxed body, a crushed spirit, a nerveless numbed consciousness of desolation and a darkened world.

But as I thought again all my thoughts of over-night : of Nephelé, the memory of whom was as a fire to shrivel all unworthiness : of my true-hearted friend, simple in his trust of me, simple in his single-hearted love for Nephelé : I could no other. And again, with what energy my flagging pulses lent, I repeated my vow ; adding to the vague resolves of the night the clear concrete decision of the morning, that never, save at Nephelé's own bidding—could that, *par impossible*, be—would I play that music ; never try the spell that would summon her spirit to company with mine, lest haply it should lead her to more intimate self-knowledge and to the discovery of deeper well-heads of love in her unfathomed maiden heart, springs whose flowing should be for another than him she now loved so truly —aye, loved, as she believed, to the utmost meaning of love.

Nephel 

As I framed this resolve, I heard the chapel bell sound; and going out to chapel, there in my place kneeling, I solemnly renewed my vow; and in the memories of all self-denials made by the noble dead before me, helped and heartened my soul to take up its part of that sacrifice of self to large aims and ideal creeds and causes, which makes the world's hope of some far-off earthly paradise.

There were few men in chapel. I spoke to none; and when I returned to my room, I felt serenity and strength of soul enough to meet the peril of looking again on that lovely face which my own hands, sleep-constrained, had brought up upon the passionless white paper.

I opened the portfolio, and took out the drawing and set it up before me.

It was very lovely, with a touch of ineffable tenderness in the softened eyes, a hint of some divine pity in the mobile lips, a trace of some undefined trouble in the delicate eyebrows; the whole likeness seeming rather the visible expression of the

Nephelée

soul of a glorious girl-being, than merely a drawing of that time-moulded life-mask, the human face.

And as I gazed on it two things befell me—one expected and one surprising. For I found, as I had foreseen, that the old melody that had brought her to me arose again in my head, and sounded softly in my ears, like the undertone of ocean to one gazing on its sunlit glory; but, on the other hand, I found the heightened temper of self-sacrifice not weakened but rather strengthened by gazing on that noble face. I felt no new assailment of temptation, but a rush of more vigorous resolve. So that I realised—with white purity of joy that had the sting of pain—that my surest bulwark would ever be the looking at this picture; that I need not destroy it, or bury it away as a banned, forbidden joy, but might look on it whenever I would, and drink thereat strength against temptation, and such solace as was left for a soul cut off from hope.

And so I kept this treasure, locked away from all eyes, and only drawn out at safe

Nephelé

times of privacy, usually late at night, when my oak was sported, and all the college was asleep, and I was working on and on at the hard reading needful for my musical degree.

Until one night, as I sat with the face before me, having laid aside my books for a moment, and having a sheet of music-paper ready for exercises under my hands, it suddenly came into my head to write down the Nephelé air that was sounding ceaselessly in my ears. Easily it flowed from my pen on to the paper; and then followed the violin part, as Nephelé herself had played it, holding the air against the under-cry of an accompaniment, half sympathy, half remonstrance. Then came variations and changes of key, and all the voluble mastery of speech, in which music has such infinite resources. And as the hours of night rolled by, I wrote down, all unconscious of time, the whole intimate communings that I had held with the spirit of Nephelé—the trembling dawn of shy intimacy, the opening revelations of soul to soul, the deepening friendship, the growing confidence, the full

Nephelée

trust, and then the inchoate sweetest of sweetest, the fledgeling timorous softness of beginning love, the love that I had realised, and which had grown in my very heart's core, but which she had, I fancied, yet fought against and kept at bay in her maiden soul, as a girl resists the conviction of what she feels is, and will be, her master.

All this, that no speech of man could ever express, took perfect and complete expression in the music that flowed out of my living soul upon the dead unsensitive paper.

The end came—no satisfying end; how could it be? The end was not yet—might, nay, I thought, would, never be. But some sort of close, tentative, unfinal, a pause with more of aroused and strained expectation than of rest, came at last to make an end for the time.

“Will there ever be any truer, more final end?” I sighed, as I laid down the pen with aching fingers. And looking up I saw that the daylight was begun.

I dried the last sheets, rose, and flung

Nephel 

open the window overlooking the gardens. It was a late October morning, misty and chilly. There was light, but no sun. Dead leaves covered the thick dewy grass, and a cold mist came in through the open window. I shivered and shut it; and locking up my night's work with the face that had evoked it, I went to a short and dream-troubled sleep.

CHAPTER VIII

THE fuller close, the final satisfaction, of that music was to come, in a way I dreamed not of. But it did not come yet, and though I more than once read the score over silently, seeking for some more satisfactory ending, I was always obliged to put it away again untouched.

The term passed. I saw Lord St. Denys often, and had pleasant, friendly, affectionate intercourse with him, in which he spoke much of Nephel  . Nor, after the first, did it pain me to hear him. I had grown into a life of self-repression and hard duty; and as every one who has lived it knows, this life becomes a habit after a while, and the daily acts of self-injury give a sort of half-sullen, half-savage pleasure, like the self-scourging of an ascetic.

I knew surely that in giving up Nephel   I was losing the great and golden glory that

Nephel 

should have been mine, the rightful heritage of my birth and being in the world; but the overriding pressure of loyalty kept me true to my self-surrender.

I was, I said to myself, as a forest fir-tree, born to a birthright of straight and lofty growth, and lopped of its leading shoot too late to make another, too early to give up life, and decay and die quietly away.

I was fain to find a makeshift substitute for the lost aspiration in my musical ambition; but alas! this was so intimately connected with the desire of Nephel , that its vigour must needs be much minished in the loss of her.

Yet I worked hard for my musical degree, and when the time came, passed with some distinction and a compliment from the examiners. It was now necessary that I should make my living in some way, and I determined to try to do so by music.

I therefore called, before I left Oxford, on one of the examiners who had complimented me, and diffidently asked him whether he could help me at all. He was

Nephelée

one of the leading musicians of Oxford, and received me very kindly, and talked to me openly, but without giving me much hope.

Briefly put, his dictum was that to make any income above that of an ordinary organist was very hard work: the openings were few, and the competitors very numerous. Teaching was the best way to make money; but it was great drudgery. My best plan, he suggested, was to seek a post as organist—the best I could get, and then begin to take pupils.

This was rather dismal-sounding advice. But it was given very kindly, and I thanked him and rose to go. As I was at the door he said—

“Of course, there is composition: you showed some facility for that in your examination. It is not ‘paying’ until you make a name; but I advise you to keep up the habit. Have you attempted anything hitherto?”

“Nothing much,” I said, “but a song or two.”

“Let me see them,” he said kindly. “I know Mr. ——, the music publisher, and

Nephelé

he would publish any songs on my recommendation, if I could give it honestly."

I went off to my rooms, and brought back with me my portfolio. As I began to open it, he took it out of my hands in his rapid way, and turned the contents quickly over. The songs were not lofty flights, and he shook his head over them.

"Reminiscences of Sullivan, Molloy, etc.," he said. "No, I am afraid there is nothing here which I—— Hullo, what is this?"

I had not remembered when I brought the portfolio that I had slipped the Nephelé music—as I called it to myself—in there the day before in a hurry, having been interrupted in a vain attempt to think out a better close.

The title on the paper was merely "A Sonata for Violin and Piano."

"This is something more ambitious," he said, and began rapidly reading it. After a few pages, he looked up, with a very different expression.

"Is this your composition?"

"Yes," I said. "At least it came to me—not from anything I ever heard."

Nephelée

"Yes, yes," he said impatiently, "of course. All great art-work comes so."

He jumped up, went hastily to the piano, and began to play my music.

I had never heard it played before by a stranger. At first it startled me, as if it were a sacrilege. But in a few minutes this feeling subsided, and I listened in a strange mood of self-pity to the strong master hands interpreting my love-dream.

He played it right through, touching in the violin part lightly where required to complete the themes, and then turned abruptly round to me.

"This alters the whole case. I thought you a clever young apprentice. Sir, you are a Master. Nothing like this has been written in England in this generation. If you fulfil the promise of this music, you will be the greatest musician of true English birth that has ever lived."

He spoke earnestly, strongly, with actual emotion. And a hundred conflicting feelings were at tumult in my heart—natural upliftings of pride, the ever present weight

Nephelé

of hopelessness, and a doubt if this music was really my own. Could I truly claim it? If not, whose was it? Where did it come from, into my brain or fingers?

The good and energetic old musician was already at his writing-table, scribbling a note. "There," he said, "this is to —, the great Director of concert music. Only last week he was imploring me to give him some new concert piece, my own, or any one's: 'something to fetch the music-people,' he said. 'They are complaining that they know all the old things, and that all the new things are *Made in Germany*, like the toys. Do, Dr. —, give me a good bit of English music to satisfy them!' This is just the very thing. I'll send it to him at once, and tell him to write to you about it. The only thing I want altered is the end," he went on. "It's like what's been said of Homer. It doesn't finish but leaves off. Don't you think that you could make more of a *finale*?"

I explained to him that I had tried several times, unsuccessfully.

Nephelée

"Well," he said, kindly, "I won't press it. It'll *do* as it is, though no doubt it leaves the ear unsatisfied—leaves a 'to-be-continued' feeling. But I know how hard it is to get the real Muse, when she comes, to work to order; and I won't touch your work, I should probably only botch it. Some day you'll have an inspiration, and put the worthy climax to this beautiful piece. There, good-bye, I must run, or I shall be late for my meeting," and I found myself hustled out of the room and walking home—without my music!

And then I began to think the scene over; and the vague hesitations and resistances that I had felt took swift and definite shape. This music was to me a part of my life, the dearest, most intimate part of my very soul; and I had let it go from me—go, to pass into the hands of a concert-master, to be performed, to cease to be my own, to become a "public thing!"

I could not bear the thought. I turned hastily, and went back towards Dr. ——'s house. Hardly had I got more than a few

Nephel 

steps, however, when he passed me in a cab, driving fast. He saw me, and waving his hand called out—

“It’s all right. I’ve posted it.”

There was no hope then, no help. I turned homeward, sore in heart, and tormented in conscience, and yet with a lurking proud delight, as the thrill of success, present and possible, came to me.

And something more there was—some undefined, elusive feeling. I had kept my vow, I had been true, I had been faithful. But the issue had been suddenly, strangely, taken out of my hands. My creation was henceforth to have a destiny of its own, independent of its creator’s will. And in that new-born destiny what other destinies were involved? Would Nephel  not surely hear the music? Would she not recognise it? Might she not even play it? And if so——

Shame rushed over me, and I walked on with quicker, more resolute stride, repeating to myself, “I will be true! I will be faithful!”

CHAPTER IX

Two days after, I got a letter from the London Concert-Director. I need not repeat all he said. Briefly, it was very flattering. He should be delighted, he said, to bring out this new piece at a grand evening concert he was going to give in February; and he offered me terms which, even to my inexperienced and therefore grandiose ideas, seemed very handsome. He added that, as time was of importance, he should be glad to have my answer as soon as possible, and if I was in Town and would call, he would like to see me.

Yet it was twenty-four hours before I could answer his letter. I saw all it meant—name, fame, and a firm foot on the ladder of success. Yet for a day and a night I could not make up my mind what to do. Was this music mine to deal with? Should I be breaking my resolve, or acting untruly

Nephel 

by my friend, if I let the train of events take their course?

I took out my picture of Nephel , and sat gazing on it; not as superstitious souls might gaze on a Madonna, seeking a sign from the dumb pencilled features; but to know what answer my conscience would make, when brought before such a judgment-seat. But I got neither sign nor answer.

“Ah,” I said, “if I could see Nephel  herself!” And even as I said this, by one of those curious felicities which we have all experienced, came the opportunity of doing so. The college messenger at that actual moment brought me a letter from Lord St. Denys, who had gone down a few days before. He asked me to spend a night at his father’s house in Town on my way home, and said that Nephel  would be there, and would like very much to meet me again.

I sat down and wrote off an acceptance to him, and the next day left Oxford for London.

All the way in the train I was debating with myself how I should ask my question.

Nephelée

Should I try to speak to Nephelée alone, or should I say what I wanted before Lord St. Denys? The latter seemed the more upright and straightforward course, if I could only so phrase my question as to give no hint of any secret understanding with Nephelée. There was, of course, no such understanding between us; but in my fancy, or in my dreams, she and I had spoken soul to soul, and I felt that, unless I was on my guard, the remembrance of this must affect me in speaking.

I was warmly welcomed in Park Lane. I had seen both the Earl and Countess before, and they always treated me as their son's intimate friend—kindly, intimately, on the pleasantest footing.

And I saw Nephelée again, and she greeted me frankly, with straight, clear, innocent eyes—so beautiful, so supra-earthly, so worship-worthy. And yet I swear that I felt in her presence no more of the fever of love than I had felt in those rare times of music-meeting. Nay, but less. My love for her was of such ethereal diaphanous

Nephel 

spirit-essence, so wholly untinged and untainted with the very slightest clouding of earthy feeling, that her bodily presence had no more effect upon it than a magnet has on gold. Our affinities were too deep, too far from the touching of hands or the glances of eyes. Even the music of her exquisite speech did not disturb me, as a woman's voice in its beauty will disturb, while it charms, her lover.

It so chanced that I had almost at once the opportunity I wanted. Nephel  and Lord St. Denys and I were alone together, and he began to ask me of my prospects; and I then told him, while Nephel  sat listening, of my interview with Dr. —, how he had treated my song-writing with contempt, and how his tone had changed on his discovering the violin sonata. I softened off the overmuch of the old man's kindly enthusiasm, but told how he had sent the sonata to London, and of the Director's offer.

Nephel  broke out in delight—

“Oh, how very good! That is delightful! And what have you said?”

Nephelée

"Well," I went on, "to tell the truth, I waited till I had seen you, for it happens that I have a curious feeling about that music. Do you remember the evening that I accompanied you at Oxford, and how we indulged in an improvisation afterwards?"

There was no shadow of confusion in the lovely face, no moment's wavering in the glance of the frank eyes, as she replied—

"Of course I do! It was a lovely air you played. Is it *that* that you have turned into a sonata?"

"Yes," I said, "and I did not like to use it without your permission."

"My permission?" She laughed. "That is a great bit of gallantry, isn't it, St. Denys? Because I was present at the birth of the work? We are pleased," she went on, in mock dignity, "to give our most gracious permission for the use of this piece of music in any way that Mr. Gerard desires. Is that right?"

So it ended. The matter, to me so serious and important, had been treated merely as a jest or a compliment; and I felt a curious

Nephel 

mixture of feelings—half relief, half resentment. What if I had not vowed my vow? What if I had drawn her spirit into communion with mine again by means of this same music? Would she have treated the matter so lightly then?

Nay, I would not be moved! My vow was sacred; her love and happiness, and that of my friend, should not be for one moment imperilled by me!

Yet, when in the evening I once again accompanied her lovely voice-like violin-playing, and felt that at a moment's relaxation of my long-tried self-repression I should be leading her away from the concerto before us into that spell-air, with all its results: that was a difficult moment. And when Lord St. Denys, who himself knew something of music, said to me afterwards in the smoking-room, "You were hardly in your usual form to-night, old man; a trifle wooden and unfeeling, eh?" I could only turn it off as lightly as I might, and secretly pour out thanks that I had been "kept from the evil."

Nephelé

The next day I went to see Mr. —, the Concert-Director, and arranged with him that the sonata should be brought out at his concert in February, and played by one of the first violinists of the day.

Lord St. Denys had successfully passed his examination, and taken his degree; and the wedding was also to take place in February, just a week after this concert. The Delisles were Roman Catholics, and there was to be a double ceremony, at a Roman Catholic church as well as an English one. And as the wedding was to take place in London, both Lord St. Denys and Nephelé would be there at the time of the concert, and both declared they wouldn't miss it for anything.

So, with all arrangements made, and with my feelings in a curious ferment, half of sick distaste of life, half of excitement and interest in the coming performance of my music, I went quietly home for the Christmas vacation.

CHAPTER X.

FEBRUARY came, and the date of the concert drew near. I went up to London to stay with friends, and the Director arranged for me to hear the rehearsal of my sonata.

It was very wonderful to hear that music again, so beautifully performed; but deeply as it moved me, it brought, thus heard, no faintest recurrence of the old effect on my spirit.

The violinist complimented me very highly, and said it was a treat to find a modern piece of music deserving, and requiring, such serious study, and claiming all the feeling of the violin and of the violinist.

The Director had spoken of the sonata to some of the great musicians, and dear old Dr. —— of Oxford had also made its praises known, so that I found there was a certain amount of anticipation and excite-

Nephelé

ment about it among musical people; and that I myself was treated with some distinction by the few that I already knew, or now met at the Director's.

The fateful evening—how fateful it was to be I did not dream—came at last.

Lord St. Denys' people, and Nephelé's, were all coming to hear the sonata, and I was to meet them at the Concert Hall, where a number of seats had been taken for the party in one of the front rows.

I went down there somewhat early, in a fever of excitement; and when I got out of my cab at the entrance, one of the attendants whom I had seen at the rehearsal, and who therefore knew me, came up at once to me.

"Would you please to come to Mr. ——'s room at once, sir."

I followed, in some apprehension, owing to the man's manner.

"Is anything the matter?" I asked him.

"Mr. —— will tell you, sir," he answered, and almost immediately I found myself ushered into the Director's room, where he

Nephel 

was walking up and down, in great excitement, talking earnestly with two or three other men.

“Oh, Mr. Gerard,” he began, “I’ve very bad news for you. Read this note!”

He tossed me an open note across the table. I read it, and saw that it was from the violinist who was to play my sonata, expressing deep regret at being unable to fulfil his engagement. He had been, he said, most foolishly, skating, and had fallen and sprained his bowing arm. The doctor said that it was impossible, apart from the pain, for him to risk using it, as it might ruin his playing for life. He was full of profound regrets, &c., &c.

It was a great blow to me. I felt suddenly, what I had hardly realised before, how much this performance meant to me, how much I had set upon it.

I made an effort, however, and mastered myself—self-control had become my habitual law of living.

“Well, one omission will not spoil your concert,” I managed to say, “and fortu-

Nephelé

nately, that was the only number that Herr —— was to play in.”

“It will spoil it very much indeed,” he replied. “It’s robbing it of its chief attraction—your sonata. I am very much upset about it. Scores and scores of people are coming to hear it; and your music is so plaguey difficult (forgive me!) that no one else that I can get could read it at sight.”

There was nothing more to be said. I left the room, and made my way to the concert room. I found my party arrived, and walked to my place next to St. Denys. He looked up and saw at once that something was the matter.

“Hullo,” he said; “what’s up? Nothing wrong?”

I shortly explained the case in a low tone, which only Nephelé, who was next him, and who leant over to listen, heard.

Her eyes were full of sympathy.

“Oh, I *am* sorry,” said Lord St. Denys. “Can no one else play it?”

“No,” I said; “the Director says it’s too ‘plaguey difficult.’”

Nephel 

There was a pause of a minute, and then Nephel  said in a low tone—

“Are you very much disappointed, Mr. Gerard?”

I looked up at her. I could not trust myself to speak. I felt my eyes were wet at the sudden shock of such perfect sympathy as her voice expressed.

She saw how it was, and went on—

“Would the Director let me play it? I think I could.”

“By Jove, Nephel , that’s a grand idea!” cried Lord St. Denys. “You are a brick!”

“Shouldn’t you mind?” I said, hardly audibly.

“No,” she said. “I’m used to playing before people.”

“I didn’t mean that,” I said, but my voice was inaudible, even to myself, and I don’t think she heard.

Lord St. Denys was eager for me to go off at once to the Director; and I went.

I found him still there with his three friends, and I told him that I knew a lady who would play the sonata.

Nephel 

“A lady?” he said. “A professional?”

“No; an amateur.”

“Oh, my dear fellow, I’m afraid it’s impossible. I can’t put amateur playing, however good, before the sort of audience we shall have to-night; it’s out of the question.”

I felt hot, but answered quietly—

“The lady in question is better than most professionals I have ever heard.”

“Who is she?” he asked.

“Miss Nephel  Delisle.”

“Who?” cried one of the other men in the room, a spectacled German. “Who did you say?”

“Miss Nephel  Delisle.”

“Ach!” he cried, in great excitement, “she is an angel of the orchestra over which St. Gabriel wields his *b ton*! I heard her lately when I was at Lord ——’s, and I was ravished. My friend,” he went on, laying a large hand on the Director’s shoulder, “your misfortune will prove a blessing in disguise if you can get Miss Delisle to play to all your audience there.

Nephelé

They will say that you have kept the good wine till the last."

The Director was a hard business man, used to regard most second-hand fame with due incredulity. But the German critic was a voice of European authority. He sprang from the table.

"Is Miss Delisle here in the audience?"

"Yes," I said, "with the Earl of Beaurepaire's party. She is *fiancée* to Lord St. Denys."

He was duly impressed, as I meant him to be.

"Would you take me to be introduced to her?"

"Certainly," I said.

It was time to begin the concert, but the Director paid no heed to the impatient stampings in the gallery and back rows, but followed me to where Nephelé was sitting.

He was evidently startled by her beauty. He made her a low bow, and sitting in my vacant seat, he spoke hurriedly to her. He said how kind it was of her to offer to play, repeated what Herr —— had said of

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her playing, and declared he should be eternally grateful to her for coming to the rescue.

"Can I send for your violin?" he said. "The sonata does not come in till the second part, so there's plenty of time."

Now, one thing I knew of Nephelé was that she never, if she could help it, let any human being but herself touch her violin, either in its case or out of it. Once she had let me carry it for her, saying that I was almost the only man who had ever been thought worthy of doing so.

I saw her look troubled, and hastily said—

"May I go? I am very careful!"

She turned grateful eyes on me.

"Thank you very much. I had rather it was some one I know. It is a precious friend, as well as a priceless instrument, you see," she said apologetically to the Director.

She scribbled a line on a leaf of her programme, for my authority, tore it off, and gave it to me. I left the Hall quickly, hailed the first cab I saw, and drove rapidly

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to the Delisles' house, where I had no difficulty in getting the instrument.

On the way back I began to reflect. What did it all mean? Where was it all leading to? Nephel  had never, to my knowledge, played this air before except when I was playing too. Would her playing it have the same magic effect as my own? A sudden throb—half of terror, half of hope—took me, and then the guilty longing, "Would God I were going to play with her!" This startled me. Was this the end of my self-effacement, of my trained self-sacrifice? No. Let Nephel  play the air! I felt that, so long as I was not playing with her, I should retain enough control over my own spirit to resist and to overcome. This, I thought, in an ascetic ecstasy, this is to be the final proof, the hardest test of all. While her wondrous hands are lending that music such an inspired tenderness that all others sit as spellbound, I alone must remain unmoved, and hear as though I heard not, keeping watch and ward over my own soul, lest if for a moment I let it "wander in

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starry ways," the spell-like power overcome me, and my spirit fly forth in that mysterious way of old to talk to her spirit, and claim and win her inmost love. "Thank God," my thought ended aloud, "thank God, I am not going to accompany her!" and as I breathed this ejaculation I arrived at the Concert Hall.

I found that the first part of the concert was just over. There was an interval of ten minutes, then the second part would begin with a song, and then came the sonata.

I found a party talking in the *foyer*, consisting of Nephelé, her brother, Lord St. Denys, and the Director, also the German critic.

"Ah, here is Mr. Gerard himself," said the Director as I joined them. "Just in time. Shall you feel equal to accompanying your own sonata?"

"I?" I said, startled. "Impossible!"

"Why?" he asked, surprised. "You must be well used to playing in public."

"Oh yes. It isn't that. I'm not nervous."

"The fact is," he continued, "that the

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man who has rehearsed it with Herr —— is at present incapable. He is a brilliant pianist, but he has a weakness that many brilliant people have; and having heard that Herr —— was not coming, I suppose he thought he wouldn't be wanted, and when I sent to him he came simply drunk. You know what your music is like. I can get it played at sight after a fashion, but it will be doing a cruel injustice to Miss Delisle's playing."

Ah! the supreme test of my endurance had come in a different form, in a tenfold harder form, than that I had pictured. I ought then, at that last hour, to have set my face like a flint and said No, I would not play; even at the risk of offending every one, Nephelé included—of being thought mad, perhaps. But I hesitated; and Lord St. Denys, in his frank, impetuous way, burst out—

"Nonsense, my dear old man! of course you'll play! It would be absurd not to. Nephelé, ask him to, and then he can't refuse!"

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The words of my vow flashed across me. Had I not sworn never to play this music *unless Nephelé asked me?* What—what—would she say?

Alas! she had none of the pride, misnamed modesty, that would have made many women think it was stooping too low to ask in this way.

Quietly, in a tranquil, sober tone, she said—

“If it is left to me, I think it would be a great pity to spoil the sonata now. Will you not play it, Mr. Gerard?”

“Yes, I will,” I said, almost inaudibly.

“That’s capital,” said the Director, and a moment later, through the open door, we heard him announcing from the platform that unfortunately Herr —— had sprained his arm, but by great good luck a young lady, well known to many present as one of the most brilliant amateurs of the day, Miss Nephelé Delisle, knew the sonata, and had consented to play it; and he was also sure the audience would be glad to hear that the gifted composer himself had been persuaded to take the piano part.

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There was a good deal of applause at this, but I hardly heard it. I felt as a seaman in the Maelstrom vortex feels. All directing power was taken out of my hands. I was helpless in the toss and whirl of circumstance. Whither was I being carried by it? To joy unutterable? to torment unending? I knew not. Yet to something that had—from the infinite beginning of things—the inevitable necessity to be.

I was roused by Nephelé saying—

“Come, Mr. Gerard, the song is over. It is our turn.”

We stepped together on to the platform.

CHAPTER XI

"You must lead me on," she said.

I took her fingers lightly in mine, and led her forward to make her bow to the audience.

There was a moment's startled silence—a "sensation," as the papers say—then a loud and sudden applause; for she looked very beautiful. Clad in perfect white, with a little gold embroidery on train and bodice, and a white flower in her hair, her regal head held straight and noble, a little touch of excitement in her cheeks and eyes, she stood tall and graceful and gentle-looking as an angel of God.

She was of a certain rare and wonderful beauty, which I must linger a moment to describe, as best words may. As every one knows, the Southern beauty of dark eyes and dark hair is usually the more mastering and impressive, while the Northern beauty of lighter hues is the more artistically lovely.

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But now and again, rare as the centennial aloe-bloom, is seen a face, fair as the Orient dayspring in golden hair and heaven-blue eyes, yet full also of the haunting wistfulness that usually looks out at us from the depths of dark-brown eyes shining under dark-brown tresses.

I know not if my words will to others recall other faces. In one face only have I who try to describe it beheld this nameless wonderful charm.

I opened the sonata on the music-rest before her, sat down to the piano, and softly played a ripple of music round and round the four violin notes, to give her the time to tune her strings, for she had had no chance before; and meanwhile I looked about.

Below me, like a flower-bed, glowed and shone and shimmered the great floor of faces and dresses, giving me an indescribable and unwonted realisation of my own existence. I, even I, was alive, now, here, at this moment, set to speak with the playing of my hands and the music of my soul to all these other living human souls. I felt them

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to be indeed "a cloud of witnesses," exalting every movement of mine, every note I touched, every sound I sounded, to some mysterious importance, vast and world-concerning.

There were some Royalties present, lately married; and out of compliment to them the hall was beautifully decorated, and the stage half-covered with palms and white flowers. There was a scent of exotic blossoms all about me. Every sense was thrilled and heightened by the sight, the scent, the sound, as my fingers swept the keys of the melodious piano.

And I turned to Nephelée to see if she was ready. What—was some apprehension, some realisation, coming to her—too late? There was a look on her face I had not seen before. Was it fear? Was it, could it be, delight, or the dream of delight? I could not say. Only I thought that in her face I saw as in a mirror the exact but fainter reflex of my own confused and tangled feelings.

One liquid look she turned on me as she

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signed her readiness to begin, one look only; but in that look a new heaven and a new earth were born for me. It was not the look of love. (That I should need even to write this denial!) It was not of any named or nameable feeling; but it was a look out of her very soul. She herself—not her brain, not her thoughts, not her feelings, not her fancies—but her very Self, for one moment looked at me. And in that moment all my doubts and dread and hesitation had vanished utterly.

This has to be! (I said to myself). Her spirit and mine have, after all this long repugnance and struggle, at last come to a point when resistance is over. Now, here, the consummation of communion has to be. Let it be! Whatever may come after, let this be! Let me speak to her, spirit to spirit, as of old, now for the last time—nay, now for the first time in perfect fulness of speech! In these few moments of measurable time there lies for me and for her a life-time long and full, and the evolving drama of two souls to be made as one.

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Love may be in it—Pain may be in it—
Death may be in it. Let them be! And
the end, though it be distant now but half
the dial-circle, shall be then, for us, as the
end of Eternity. Let it be!

And in an ecstasy—as if I was verily
stepping through the gate that led into a
new life and a Dante-world of Purgatory
or Paradise—I began to play.

Yes—there was no change, no loss. The
air had the same spirit-spell as before. As
I played it first, before the violin took it
up, I seemed to be floating in a dream-river
of bodiless sensation, and calling to her
spirit on the bank to come, come, and join
me.

And she heard; and the violin took up
the air, and, lo, her spirit had joined me;
and there were little undertones of softest
wailing reproach as our spirits first spoke
together—what words can give them? It
was as though we each cried to the other,
Why this long time? why this long parting?
why this misunderstanding? And then the

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reproaches melted into sweetest, most intimate felicity of perfect reconciliation. We were together for all time. As the soul and body are reunited in Blake's picture, so we were together.

Was this all? All! nay, this was but the beginning. All the inmost recesses of thought and consciousness remained to be laid bare by each to each, till nothing that the one knew or felt or thought was alien to the other's mind and heart and memory. All my resolve, all my self-repression, my days of self-torture, my nights of aching and agony, all had to be told her in wordless wonderful unfoldings. All her tremblings, her restraints, her love for her plighted lover, her resistance to the realisation of a greater love, all these I grew to understand, yet so that to phrase it in language is impossible. It was not in language—not in thought even—that I understood her, or she me; and what I now write down is but the impression of that time translated into the misinterpreting medium of thought and language. Had we ceased our playing that

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moment she could not have said what had been my feelings, nor I what had been hers. There were no dates, no categories, no laws of logic, none of the moulding lines of human thought, in our converse. Only, we knew one another—knew, as never souls out of Heaven have known each other before. And for long days, as it seemed, we lived in the daily deepening joy of growing intimacy, even as I had seemed to live with the unnamed girl-spirit, when first this air came to me in the school chapel long ago.

Yet blissful as this intimacy was, full of continuous satisfactions, rising one after the other as each remaining nucleus of strangerhood melted, as little clouds melt in the moonlight; yet through all, to my hungering soul there was some lack: some craving I felt that would not be satisfied. And in some wonderful way I knew what this thing that I hungered for, and that came not yet, was. For while my innermost self soul lived this life of rapture, the dry-eyed brain and human reason in me stood by, as it

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were, as a mere spectator, a witness of what was taking place, though without power to help or hinder. And so I knew, in the brain and reason, that the thing I was waiting for was Love—the Master-love to unite for ever our two spirits. And I knew that in the music I had written, Love had place; that there the growing harmony of the two spirits ended in the perfect union of love. And I watched till Love should come.

Not without struggle it came, not without difficulty, not without pain. For there came a moment in our spirit-communion when the last veil that remained between us had to be torn away, when I had, in the un-languaged spirit way, to confess to this sister-spirit that met with mine freely and intimately as twin-brother with twin-sister, that I loved her with a deeper and more eternal love than the birth-love; and to challenge her to search her own heart, and say if she loved me not with the same. And yet to do so filled me with pain, for I knew that she loved her plighted lover with a true woman's love; and that to bid her, as

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I must bid her, to search diligently if there were not ampler unfilled chambers in her heart, where a greater, more controlling love was to rule, was to put her to torture of conscience, and torment of feeling, and tearing of the very heart-fibres in twain.

And as the music grew troubled and more troubled under the shadow of this looming dark necessity, I felt as if the nearest languageable likeness to this dread stage of our soul-communion should be the going down, hand in hand, of two affrighted children to some shuddering cave of horror, to ask of witch or wizard of some dreaded future that lay before them. Black air was about us, and the darkness of no natural night, and the wailing of miserable winds ; while fearful forms, in mocking likeness of the desired dead, rose and menaced and passed.

The music had now lost all its calm and all its melodic delight, and was full of moans and cries, and the sense of fierce fightings between dearest friends, of woundings more painful to those that gave than to those that took them.

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And still, side by side, tone answering to tone, note timed perfectly with note, we kept on our way together through this valley of the shadow. Till suddenly, with a crash as of Sinai thunder, the struggle was over, and the awaited answer, for good or for evil, for ever and ever and ever, was given and accepted. And the answer was the confession of Love.

She loved me, yes, even as I loved her. The last husk of disunion was stripped and shrivelled. We had fought hard to our utmost of strength to be allowed to walk on still in the twilight, shunning the dazzling daylight that Love had prepared for us to walk in; but the Master had conquered, and now there was nothing for us but to go in with him, out of the dark lands of storm and anguish and bleak desolation, into his Eden of everlasting joy.

And the music soared and sang till it swelled to a triumphal marriage-march. The wedding-hour of our souls was come; and to my on-looking Reason there seemed an ordained fitness in the white flowers

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around us, the exotic scents, the brilliant crowd of gazers. Then, there, without speech, without language, spirit to spirit plighted everlasting troth, and soul to soul was knit in bonds more indissoluble than the chain that binds the stars to their courses. And a great happiness, which human words of joy can no more present than a pictured sun can give sunshine, surged and overwhelmed us. The waves of a deep peace closed over us, as the stream closes over water-creatures returned to the water. Our souls were as one soul, our thoughts as one thought, our wills as one will. All that I knew of my own heart I knew of hers also. The utter consummation, the absolute merged oneness, was completed, and a new life of the one soul that had been two was beginning.

And now there happened a great marvel. For the written music here came to its close. The end which I had imagined, and which I had tried to write down in the score, was the end of completed union; but, as I said before, I had not been successful

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in the close. There was still a want of finality—a sense of unsatisfaction, as if the end was not yet. And why this was so I now understood. The goal of completed union to which our spirits had attained was not the end, but rather the beginning—the opening morning of a new unimaginable life.

Yet, as the written music stopped there, my Reason, the onlooker, fell to wondering what would happen next. Would our playing cease when the score ended, and break off this Elysian life of joy at its very beginning, as a dream is broken when the sleeper wakes? And if so, what life could hereafter be endurable for her and for me? If parted, should not our torn hearts bleed to death? If together, how should we answer the upbraidings of conscience?

And even as I wondered thus, I was conscious that others also were expecting the end. The Director and his friends from the wings of the stage, Lord St. Denys in the front row beneath us, these at least knew that the score was nearing its close,

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and were preparing, I could feel, for a great applause.

But no, the end was not to be yet! For when the music should have stopped, my hands, as if without my will, went on playing, and the violin notes, without break or change or moment's hesitation, continued in harmony as perfect as before.

I could feel the startled astonishment of those few of the audience who knew the music as it was scored; and I felt in my own breast a strange solemn wonder, almost dread, to know what new development of dream-life and spirit-love lay before us.

And now I knew surely what I had guessed before, that this music, published to the world as mine, was not mine more than it was Nephelée's, nor yet hers more than it was mine. For just as it had happened before, that this air only came to me through the realisation of her presence and influence, so now I found it was not I who was leading and she who was following my lead, but that we were playing, as one player, what neither of us alone knew beforehand

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nor awaited, both following together some inmost instinct that we shared but could not divide.

We were, as it seemed, exploring together a new-found Paradise, strange, immortal, undescribed. All the ecstasy of April woodlands, of June midnights, of wide sunlit prospects, all that ever lends wings to the human soul, or loosens it awhile from its frightened clinging to time and the solid earth, to soar singing to the gates of Eternity—all this we found in the music that came to us. And ever in oneness of emotion our spirits swept on to new gains of insight and exhilaration, treading unseen pathways, and drinking such joy as never reaches the human spirit through the clogged pores of the five physical senses.

This, I think—nay, do I not know it?—was the supreme moment of my life. Never before, never since, has my soul touched such heights of ecstasy. Yet so full, so satisfying was the joy, that it could leave no sting of regret, no insatiable thirst for its return. Having lived that moment—for I think

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that it lasted but a moment, though we lived an eternity while it lasted—I can say serenely “I have lived.” All lower joys are indistinguishable from sorrows, to a soul that has been in such a Heaven. The mere memory of it transcends all pleasure and deadens all pain, and is a master current in my life, that still continues.

And I wondered if this was the end, if the music would melt and fade and die in pure rapture. But even while I was thus wondering, I knew of a coming change. A note of terror was muttering and growing louder and shriller in the midst of the psalm of perfected life; and, swiftly as an oncoming storm, it swelled and swelled, till all the music was turned to wild lamentable confusion.

What was this that could break up the peace of Paradise? What was this that could affright two souls made one in the union of ineffable love? I knew! I knew! It was the Past, with its terrible trumpet-tongued recall—Too late! Too late! To both of us, as our spirits clung together in inviolable union, sounded this doom—Too

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late! and from both of us came back the bitter hopeless cry—Oh, had we known before! Oh, had we known before!

And then there came a new agony in the music that we were living together, a new strife, insupportable, tearing the very vital soul in twain. It was the strife between Conscience, crying of Honour and Duty and plighted Faith: and Nature, maintaining the inalienable right of her supreme overriding dominion. And herein lay the terror, the intolerable anguish, of this struggle: that both the striving principles claimed to speak with the voice of God, and echoed with the thunder-menace of God's own laws. The law of Conscience and the law of Nature were at fiercest strife. Nature cried — "These are my children, meant from the everlasting beginnings of destiny to be thus joined in one; each imperfect alone—together, most perfect of created lives." Conscience cried — "The Past is irrevocable: the dues of honour pledged must be paid: one life blighted, and faith extinguished by a deed of unfaith, countervails all perfection."

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Fiercer and more unendurable grew the struggle. Our spirits clung together, while the force as of a hundred tearing hands sought to separate them. And through all the agony, to be together in suffering seemed happiness only less than to be together in joy.

What the wild music we were playing sounded like to other ears, I cannot guess. To us it was life itself at its utmost possible tension. And presently I knew—she knowing in my knowing—that the decision was nearing, to be made for us or by us—the decision which, whatever way it fell, could bring nothing but anguish and inextinguishable woe. It was nearing, nearing—separation for ever, and all life broken and hopeless; or union for ever, and the everlasting whirling in the flamewind of hell.

But even as despondency grew to despair at such inevitability of misery, I began to hear a new tone in the music, the increasing roar of an unlooked-for doom, of a doom that might be terrible, yet which should come welcome as an Angel of deliverance.

And now the likeness seemed this: that

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we were floating together down a broad and rapid stream, borne irresistibly on to the unseen roaring waterfall. Swifter and swifter raced the current, closer and closer we clung as we neared the peril, louder and louder rose the thunders of the inevitable fall, thrown, in masses mightier than Atlantic billows, over fathomless precipices of footless rock.

What was this doom that should save us from the awful choice, this destruction that was to be salvation, I knew not, guessed not. Nor, for all the awful terror of it, had I any fear, had she any fear, even to that last moment when the glassy water-slope slipped from under us, and down—down—we were falling—falling—together——

Her fingers failed, and mine, at the same note. For one moment the cessation of the music was as the waking from a dream. By one instantaneous glimpse, as in a lightning flash between two blacknesses, I knew that I was falling in a faint upon the keyboard, and that Nephelé was swooning also—and then I knew no more.

CHAPTER XII

WHAT actually happened I must tell from the account of others. I was plunged into a merciful blackness of oblivion and perfect unconsciousness, and knew nothing of it till long after.

Most of the daily papers had some account of the performance, and detailed the occurrence that ended it. I will quote—omitting the technical description of the music—from one of the best accounts, which must, I fancy, have been either inspired by the Director, or written by one of his friends who had been present.

. . . “The audience listened spellbound, so beautiful was the music, so perfect the rendering. At the same time there was an emotional power in the music that came in time to be felt by the listeners as a positive tension of the nerves, and those who had been privileged to see the score were feeling

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something very like relief to know that it was nearing the end, when they were astonished by a strange and almost inexplicable occurrence. Instead of ceasing when the written score ended, both the violinist and the pianist went on without a break into a new and most beautiful passage, of such supreme delight that all strain was forgotten, and pure enjoyment took its place. We understand that Miss Delisle had never seen the score till that night, and if so it is impossible to speak too enthusiastically of the way in which she took up the hints given by the piano part, and followed out the variations note by note in perfect accord with Mr. Gerard's improvisation. It was a feat that we should have declared beforehand to be absolutely impossible even to the greatest living musicians. The tax upon attention, and every other power of mind and body, must have been tremendous, and in fact it was too great and too prolonged. For during what we imagine was to have been the finale, and while the music was working up to a close of the most marvellous interest

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and anticipation, and the audience was listening with actually breathless suspense, Miss Delisle was suddenly observed to sway and totter and fall in a dead faint. Lord St. Denys and others sprang upon the platform in a moment, and it was then noticed that Mr. Gerard too had fainted on his seat at the piano. There was a good deal of sympathetic interest evinced by the audience, and much comment was made upon the curious simultaneity of the fainting fit which had prostrated the two gifted performers. No doubt the heat of the Hall had much to do with it. Our architects are still all at sea as to ventilating a large building, and it is possible that some unconscious person, opening a door at some distance, had driven a gust of over-heated and de-oxidised air on to the stage. But, as we observed before, the physical tension of such a brilliant *tour-de-force* must have been tremendous, and would render the highly-strained nerves of the performers unusually sensitive to untoward influences of exhalation or pressure. The two unfortunate victims, who had but a

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minute before been enchaining the vast audience, were now conveyed unconscious out of the Hall, while, after a brief interval, the concert proceeded to its conclusion. No doubt Mr. Gerard's sonata will be heard very soon again, and the score published, when we shall hope to give a longer and more detailed account of this very beautiful production."

This account appeared in next day's paper, but it was many days before I saw or was able to read it. The friends at whose house I was staying got me home as quickly and gently as they could; but I have no recollection of that, or of anything but broken and fitful moments of consciousness, and long, interminable dreams, alternating between happiness and pain with almost monotonous regularity, as if huge succeeding waves with mountainous crests and infinite abysses now lifted me up to Heaven and now lowered me down to Hell. And always, in dreams or waking moments, I had the feeling of being torn and bleeding—of being a half-creature whose

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other half had been violently rent away ; so that I dimly remember wondering, in the silly-sensible way of dreams, whether *my* half would live, or the other, or perhaps neither.

Actually, I was living through an attack of brain-fever, and for a fortnight I lay in extreme and dangerous illness, ministered to, as I knew afterwards, most gently, most tenderly, most kindly, and with trained nurses for day and night. At last it was seen that a crisis was approaching—some change for better or for worse, possibly for the worst, was nearing ; and this came in a strange and unexpected way.

It was at night, the whole house was asleep, and the night nurse was dozing between the times of necessary ministration, when every one in the house was wakened by the sound of music. Some one in the darkened drawing-room was playing on the piano.

How I had made my way there I do not know ; but I remember very clearly the rest—how I found my fingers on the yielding keys, and began, will-lessly, to play

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the Nephelé air. Feebly I played it, for I was very weak, but truly and accurately. And then the old sensation came over me again, and once more I was in close intimate communion with my sweet sister-spirit. And I knew that we were ending the music as we had left it in the Concert Hall, that the broken-off passage had passed into the recurrence of the first air, with new harmonies and a new meaning. The crash, the fall, the terror was over, and only remained the quiet lapse to the close.

Ah, how sweet, how sweet was that time! Long it seemed, and yet it was a very few minutes. The broken was united again, the torn, the wounded, the bleeding was made whole: our spirits were knit once more in unity as of a single living soul, and together we lapsed gently, gently, to the end.

And I knew now what the end was. It was Death—"Death as the friend," the friendliest, the gentlest, solving for us in peace the terrible agonising dilemma which had seemed so hopeless, so inevitable. And with a sense of sunshine, and eternal flowers,

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and angel smiles, softly I played the closing chord.

Alas! our physical natures had not that intimate unity which our spirits had! I knew not then that the death that we reached, the friendly delivering death, came not to both of us—came to Nephelée—came not to me. The one was taken, the other left. Our spirits had passed together to—even, I thought, through—the gate of death, all the pain and all the terror swallowed up in the joy of union and of deliverance from the dreaded future. It is easy to understand that there was some greater frailty of constitution in the girl-nature or greater robustness in the man; easy to understand that the laws of physical nature—resistless while flesh is flesh—decided that difference of vital power, which parted our spirits even within the doors of Bliss, when they seemed joined, inseparable, for ever and ever.

I knew not this at the time. With the last note of the music unconsciousness fell upon me. But in the morning, when the rest of the world awoke, I woke too, as I

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had not waked for many mornings, weak, tired, but with clear eyes and unstopped ears for the sunlight and the flowers in the room, and the twittering of birds in the trees outside, and with unclouded brain to realise, with certainty as of revealed truth, that Nephelé was dead.

Yet, strange to say, I felt no poignant sorrow, no sudden stabbing pain, to cause me to turn my face to the wall and cry—Would God that I had died too! Rather, a numb opiate-like peace lay on my spirit. I had lived my life: I had found the loveliest soul that ever lived outside the courts of Heaven, and with her had tasted love such as no mortal ever knew before: I had parted from her in rapturous farewell at the very gate of Heaven: the rest of life, long or little, quiet or stormy, could have nothing in it to wash out the past, nothing to separate, to annoy, to perplex. And in this peace I began to recover.

For that had been truly the crisis of my illness, as it had of Nephelé's—a crisis ending for me in one way, for her in another.

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When I was strong enough to be told, I learned what had taken place that night. How most of the household had come down, half in awe, to find out what meant this strange music playing in the dark room. How the nurse—who was an experienced and sagacious woman—had stopped those who would have stayed my playing, and softly wrapped me, as I sat at the piano, in warm folds of woollen wraps, and whispered to the rest to let be. “Who can tell,” she said, “if this may recall him to life? The ‘ruling passion’ has done such a thing before now.”

And so, with one dim light in the darkened room, they watched and listened. It was but for a few minutes. None there were musicians skilled enough to know much of what I played; but all were penetrated with the blissful angelic sweetness and breathing heavenly peace of the music, as it rose and sank, and sank, and died away; till with the last note I slipped down in the chair, lapsed again into unconsciousness, and they bore me off again to my room.

The nurse watched by me with ceaseless

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care during the rest of the night, and as the morning came she perceived that the crisis was over, and that I was to live.

Of my days of convalescence there is nothing much to say that bears on the story I have set myself to tell. But as strength returned, interest in things and people grew stronger, and I found myself wondering as to the other actors in the drama. None had told me Nephel  was dead—none had mentioned her name. The first person my friends spoke of to me, when they found I wished to know what was going on in the world, was Lord St. Denys. He had come daily to inquire for me, and implored to be allowed to see me; but the doctor's orders were strict, and even he had to be refused. He had sent flowers that I could not see or smell, and fruit that I could not eat, and my eyes filled with tears as I heard of all his acts and thoughts of friendliness.

And then the ghost of a feeble conscience awoke, and accused me of having been unworthy, of having been traitor to my friend; and, do what I would, I could not still this

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voice. Yet some other voice in me protested that the accusation was unjust; that I had fought a good fight, and had kept faith; that all that had taken place was in spite of me, was no act of my own; and that in this spirit-communion with her who was to have been my friend's wife, I, and she also, had owned to the full the claims of honour and of plighted faith; and that death had come to save us all from a terrible tangle of antagonising love and duty and friendship.

And then I began to wonder—Did he know anything? Did he guess anything? What had he, and others, thought of the performance, of its fatal finish, and of the illness that struck down both Nephel  and me with such strange simultaneity?

There was no one of whom I could inquire. All that I wished to know was too secret, too sacred, to be spoken of; and I feared to ask any question, lest I should betray anything of that inward life-drama of mine, that was to me so much more real than the little over-rippling waves of outward events.

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All I asked was if Lord St. Denys had been to the house lately.

"Not quite lately," answered the dear silver-haired lady, who, with her younger sister, had made her house the friendliest house of friends to me during so many days. "Not since——" and she stopped, with trouble in her eyes.

"Not since Miss Delisle died?" I asked.

"No—not since then," she answered, surprised. "But who told you she was dead?"

"No one told me—I knew somehow. Perhaps I dreamed it," I went on, anxious not to make a mystery, or to suggest any spiritual communication.

"Yes," she continued gently, with tears in her kindly eyes. "Miss Delisle died the same night that you began to recover. She took brain fever, as you did; and it ran the same course, only she had not the strength you had."

At this moment the nurse came in, and the lady said to her—

"Mr. Gerard knows what we wanted to keep from him—about poor Miss Delisle.

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He thinks he must have dreamed it, as he says no one told him."

"Ah," said the nurse, "it is wonderful what the ear will take in sometimes, when the mind is all wandering. I have no doubt he heard something said, sometime when we thought he was unconscious in delirium, and it got to the brain somehow and stuck there."

I said nothing, glad that any explanation should be found to satisfy them, and others, and prevent questions or guessings.

"So, I suppose," went on my hostess, "there can be no harm now in giving him Lord St. Denys' letter?"

"No, I think not," said the nurse.

They brought me the letter, deep-edged with black; and as I opened it, I wondered in myself if now I was to learn what I so much wanted to know.

It was very short, the cry of a sorely wounded heart. "I cannot come to see you; and if I could, I might not tell you," it said. "They will give you this letter as soon as they think you well enough. Nephelé is dead; and just now I have hard work to

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keep from wishing that I were too. I am going abroad with my brother. I shall learn to bear it in time. And when I come back, I hope to find you strong and well, and to talk much to you of Nephel . I think she would have sent you a message, but she was only conscious for a few moments together; and you will understand how precious they were to me."

This was the whole of the letter; and it comforted me not a little; for I saw from it that nothing had come to disturb my friend's peace of mind—to suggest any deeper feeling between Nephel  and me. She had loved him to the end with the same love she had given him at first—a strong true woman's love; a love that any man would have died to win of her; a love which to every man in the world, save one, would have seemed the highest and deepest of her nature. To this love, and to her plighted troth, she had been true, always; nay, to have been otherwise was to her, for no stress or strain or struggle possible.

And as I lay with closed eyes, I thanked

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God for her who had departed this life so nobly. I felt no doubt, no misgiving, no jealousy. That I had won of her some far deeper, far more intimate love—some nameless soul-emotion, to which her love for her lover bore the same pale kinship as sister-love does to wife-love—this I knew. And I found no stumbling-block, no difficulty. I seemed to have sounded depths of spirit-being beyond the ken of man's experience, beyond the plumb-line of the metaphysician. If hereafter there were to be knowledge, and re-union, and a new life, then I felt serenely certain that there would be no jarring or antagonism; that loves and friendships, that knit us three in ties so impossible on earth, would all be simply understood, and have right order and place. As my spirit-communion with her had been beyond the reach of language to phrase, or of thought to syllogise, so the relations between us three were beyond the possibility of expression in human thought. They were, they are, a reality; and yet realised in earthly life, they must have rent us all, hearts and souls, in sunder, in endless irremediable torment.

CHAPTER XIII

AFTER this my recovery proceeded apace, and in a comparatively short time the nurse was able to leave me; and I was well enough to go to the seaside to pick up strength. The two kind sisters, who had so tenderly cared for me, insisted on going with me. They wanted a change, they declared, and were going to take a house at Freshwater, where I must come and stay with them as their guest.

It was now April, April at its best, mild and soft, with many days of unbroken sunshine. A very few days made a surprising difference in my strength, and I was soon able to walk on to the beautiful Downs, able indeed, as my hostesses good-humouredly complained, to walk further than they could accompany me.

But as I thus rose up out of the valley of the shadow of Death, and began to face

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life again—to feel that mere passive dreamy convalescence was not life—that I had to live my time here on earth, to use my hands, my brain, my nerves—there came over me an intolerable weight of misery, and I felt as if the prospect were unendurable. Life, with love and the hope of love extinct at the beginning—life, with its dreams for ever broken and spent—how could I go out to it? Where could I gather the daily measure of hope to replenish the daily waste of will?

I felt as a man shipwrecked in vast vacant seas, who with labour and effort has won to some floating spar, and climbed upon it. Then, looking round for helpful sail or friendly shore, he sees nothing but the wide and desert ocean.

For Nephelé, and my love of her, had so grown into my being, that all I thought and planned had reference to her. Even when I had resolutely renounced the dream of winning her, the world had yet held her, living—not for me indeed, and yet indeed for me. For the lamp, which is one

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man's treasure, may be a light to lighten many others. In all I did or thought or dreamed, she was ever before me. In the very agony of my renunciation of her, I had pictured her as looking on in pitying approval. To be worthy in her eyes—worthy in conduct, worthy in talent, worthy in every way—this had been the mainspring of my life.

And now . . .

It was a bright afternoon on the cliffs. I had strolled some way, and was sitting in brooding solitude near the cliff-edge where the cliffs are highest, with darker and darker thoughts succeeding one another. "What!" I cried to myself, suddenly conscious of unaccepted benedictions in air and sun and sea, of rejected loveliness in the shining shadow-pencilled cliffs, "What! has it come to this, that Nature at her loveliest has no power to soothe me, or to lend me one moment's touch of the old delight? Then there is indeed nothing to live for! I will live no longer!"

And I rose to walk towards the edge of

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the sheer cliffs; and I verily believe that the stress of my despair had for the moment overborne all the natural dread and repulsion of such a death.

But even as I rose I perceived some one approaching, whom the slope of the ground had hidden from me, while I was reclined on the grass. He drew near, and paused close to me. I raised my eyes, sullenly, angrily, and saw that it was an old Roman Catholic priest, whom I had noticed once or twice before about the place. So courteously he greeted me that I was constrained to return the greeting. And heedless of my curt reply, he began to talk—stranger-talk, commonplaces of the weather and the lovely scene before us. I listened, replying only with a gloomy “yes” or “no,” impatient for him to be gone while yet the hunger of death was fierce within me.

And then I saw that he was drawing something from under his cape—a roll of paper. And softly he said—

“Are you not Mr. Gerard?”

“Yes,” I said, startled at being known.

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"I have been some days trying to find you, alone," he continued, "to give you this."

He unwrapped the roll, and lo! it was the score of the Nephelé sonata—the score which I had forgotten completely, ever since it had been left on the music-stand in the Concert Hall. I gazed at it in wonder. The whole current of my thought was turned back.

"Who are you?" I asked abruptly. "How came this in your hands?"

He replied gently—

"I am family confessor to the Delisles. I knew Nephelé Delisle all her life."

As he was speaking he had quietly turned the first page of the music, and opened before my eyes the beautiful melody which had once been to me as the very key of Heaven.

There is a wonderful instinct of prescient sympathy developed in a kindly-hearted old Roman Catholic confessor, who has spent his life in listening to the faults and follies of human beings. Had he guessed what

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were my thoughts when he came up? Had he chosen his words and opened the music purposely, fore-knowing what effect they would have upon me? I hardly know. But if he had, his purpose was gained. The mere glance at the musical score, the mere mention of Nephel 's name, awoke again in me the memory of her, and the old desire to be worthy of her. The black fiend of despair was routed once and for ever; and tears fell from my eyes upon the score as the Father laid it gently in my hands. I made no attempt to hide them from his kindly sight.

He laid his hand upon my shoulder, and said—

“Will you sit down again? I have much to tell you.”

We sat down side by side on the warm thyme-scented turf, and gently he began to speak.

“I said that I had known Nephel  Delisle all her life, and I confessed her before, poor child, she had any sin-stain on her white soul, if indeed there were ever ought

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in her that even the best of us would dare to call sin. Once, some four or five years ago, she came to confession with a trouble about her violin-playing, of which she was passionately fond. She told me that on a certain afternoon, when she took her violin to play her exercises, she found she could not begin them, but against her will, as it seemed, began to play a strange and beautiful air of which she knew nothing before. And that in spite of her efforts to leave off, the music took such hold upon her that she went on and on for some time. And all the time, she said, she was conscious of some one being near her—some one she did not know, but with whom in some mysterious way she seemed to be exchanging thoughts and holding converse. She was much disturbed in mind, and asked me if I thought it could have been an evil spirit that spoke to her, though the music, she said, seemed too lovely to have anything of evil in it. I comforted her, and told her it was more likely to be an angel than an evil spirit, and that she need not be afraid.

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But privately I advised her parents to stop her violin-playing for a while, as I thought it had been too much for her delicate nerves. This they did, and she was not allowed to resume it, in spite of all her entreaties, for some time.

“It was several years after, that she came to me again with a rehearsal of exactly the same experience. She was a grown-up young woman now, and by no means nervous or hysterical, and I was puzzled by the repetition of the phenomenon. Still I set it down to purely physical causes, and an imagination excited to vivid power by the influence of music; and, as before, I told her to think nothing of the matter, but to leave off her playing, and take a rest for a time. This she did.

“Then, last summer, came her visit to Oxford, of which you know. When she returned home she immediately came to me, and told me that she had met in Oxford a great friend of Lord St. Denys, the best accompanist she had ever found; and how you had startled her by playing the same

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music she had herself played on those two mysterious occasions; and how she had played it with you for a short time, till, finding that, in some way she could not explain, she was beginning to converse, as she said, with the most open intimacy, with a comparative stranger, she contrived to snap her string and end the music.

“I now perceived that there was something more in the matter than I had at first thought, something quite unexplained by ordinary physical laws. I knew of her engagement to Lord St. Denys, and gravely and fatherly I pressed her with intimate questionings, till she had told me, I truly believe, all that she knew herself of the innocent inmost of her own heart. She loved Lord St. Denys with an honest, tender, womanly love—loved him deeply, and with as much passion as her white soul could know. When I found this to be so, as indeed I had before thought, I felt in great measure relieved for her. I felt no fear that, unconsciously to herself, she had begun to cherish the seeds of another love,

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or did not love truly him to whom she had plighted her troth. But I thought, and told her, that the explanation was probably to be found in something of the nature of thought-transference or hypnotism, that she had been hypnotised unconsciously by your music, and had been thinking the thoughts you had suggested. The more I reflected the more probable did this explanation of musical hypnotism appear to me.

“She asked my advice as to playing with you in future. She had taken a great liking to you, partly as Lord St. Denys’ great friend, partly, she said, from your sympathetic touch on the piano. She foresaw that she would be often brought into contact with you, and asked me if I thought she would be putting herself under your influence too much if she played with you, as of course it would be natural for her to do.

“The question gave me some perplexity, and at last I determined to ask a very distinguished and powerful hypnotist, whom I knew slightly, what he thought of the case. I described the circumstances to him fully,

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only suppressing a few non-material points, and mentioning no names except, necessarily, Miss Delisle's. He did not negative the idea, but said that he had never himself, though a musician, found any such power in music; and he asked me if he might see Miss Delisle. She consented, in her bright, open, almost royal way, to see him, and the interview took place at my house. But, almost without any experiment, the hypnotist declared at once that she was not a subject for hypnotism. The words he used I do not exactly remember, but he plainly meant that she was too strong and healthy minded; and he scouted the idea of any hypnotist or mesmeriser having any power over her.

"After this decided opinion, I knew not what to make of the matter. I found out from Miss Delisle that it was only that particular music which had had this strange effect upon her, and that when you had accompanied her in another piece she had felt nothing unusual, except that you were a very good accompanist. I therefore advised her to act naturally, and when necessary to play to

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your accompaniment, but to avoid the former experiment of improvisation with you.

"I believe," he went on, "she played with you repeatedly?"

I nodded assent.

"Yet she never had any recurrence of the former experience till that evening — that fateful evening—at the concert?"

I broke in—"Did they tell you—did you know—that I refused at first to play that music with her? I knew only too well what its power was. I had vowed a vow before the Sacred Elements that I would never play this music unless she asked me to, and I had kept my vow. God knows what it had sometimes cost me, but I had kept it."

"Lord St. Denys told me that she had asked you to play it," he said. "How did it so come about?"

I told him briefly of what had happened when I found the sonata could not be played—of Nephelé's offer to play it—of the failure of the accompanist—of Lord St. Denys' bidding her ask me.

"And she did!" he said with a sigh. "That

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was like her. So chivalrous—so fearless—so full of compassion! Having played so often with you, with no repetition of the former feelings, she had lost the fear of their recurrence; and in her pity for your disappointment—in her wish to do whatever Lord St. Denys bade her—she complied with his request, confident, I doubt not, that nothing could shake her love for him, and possibly, with her native daring, anxious to face and overcome what she thought was a superstitious feeling.”

We both sat silent for some minutes. At last I said: “Have you anything more to tell me of her? Why did you come to find me?”

“To bring you the music, and, yes, to see you, to know what you were like, and to hear your account of this strange story. Will you confide in me enough to tell it me?”

I did so. I told him all I have written—all my feelings and my dreams, and my communion with that sweet spirit—down to the moment when her spirit and mine parted at

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the very gates of death—she to pass within them, I to be left without.

“Ah!” he said, “I was in the house at that moment. She was very ill. The doctor had said that the crisis was at hand; and they were watching by her, when she aroused and asked for her violin. They thought her mind was wandering; but she asked again so decidedly, so imperiously, that it was brought. And I came into the room, and heard her play. She sat up in bed, propped by pillows, and weak as she was, played such a sweet, solemn, exquisite cadence that we could none of us keep from tears. And then she sank back quietly on the pillows—dead. Do you know,” he went on, “that it came across me, even at that moment, that her spirit was taking its farewell of the other human spirit with which it had been so strangely connected!”

We sat long, the good old priest and I, in intimate talk. He told me of Lord St. Denys, and of his most touching last interview with Nephel , and how he never had the least suspicion of any other love in her

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heart than for him, and went away almost broken-hearted.

“It is very wonderful,” went on the old man, “no philosophic nor religious theories that I know of can explain it. It has been well said that there are many creatures at home in this one body and soul of ours; and in her, pure as crystal, true as steel, there was a love, and another love. Will you think me impertinent,” he went on, “if, as an old man—were you of our creed, I would say as a priest—I pronounce that I see no error, no fault, in all you said or did; rather much self-restraint and self-denial, and uprightness of conduct. May you have your reward!”

He ended as a priest in benediction; and I felt a soothing comfort in his words.

Before we parted, he told me how he had quietly found out about me, and followed me, unknown to any one.

“I had your music to give you; but I thought it better no one should know of my speaking to you, no one at all.”

There was no need for him to say more.

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I fully understood what he meant, that these things were sacred to him and to me. Who else could understand? Who else would not have misunderstood? Would it not have been mere aimless cruelty to Lord St. Denys to run the risk of sowing the least seed of suspicion in his heart? To me it was, and is, a mystery. What would it have been to him?

Many months had passed before I saw him, and then we had affectionate and intimate talk; nor am I ashamed to say that, men as we were, we both wept openly.

I often saw him till his death last year. He never married: there was no need for him to marry, he said simply, as his younger brother had sons to secure succession to the title.

My life is a quiet one, that of an organist in a country town. I have never turned out a great composer; and I have never been able to bring myself to publish that sonata—Nephel 's sonata: it is still in MS. Nor do I dare often to play it. The memories it brings, though not all painful, are too

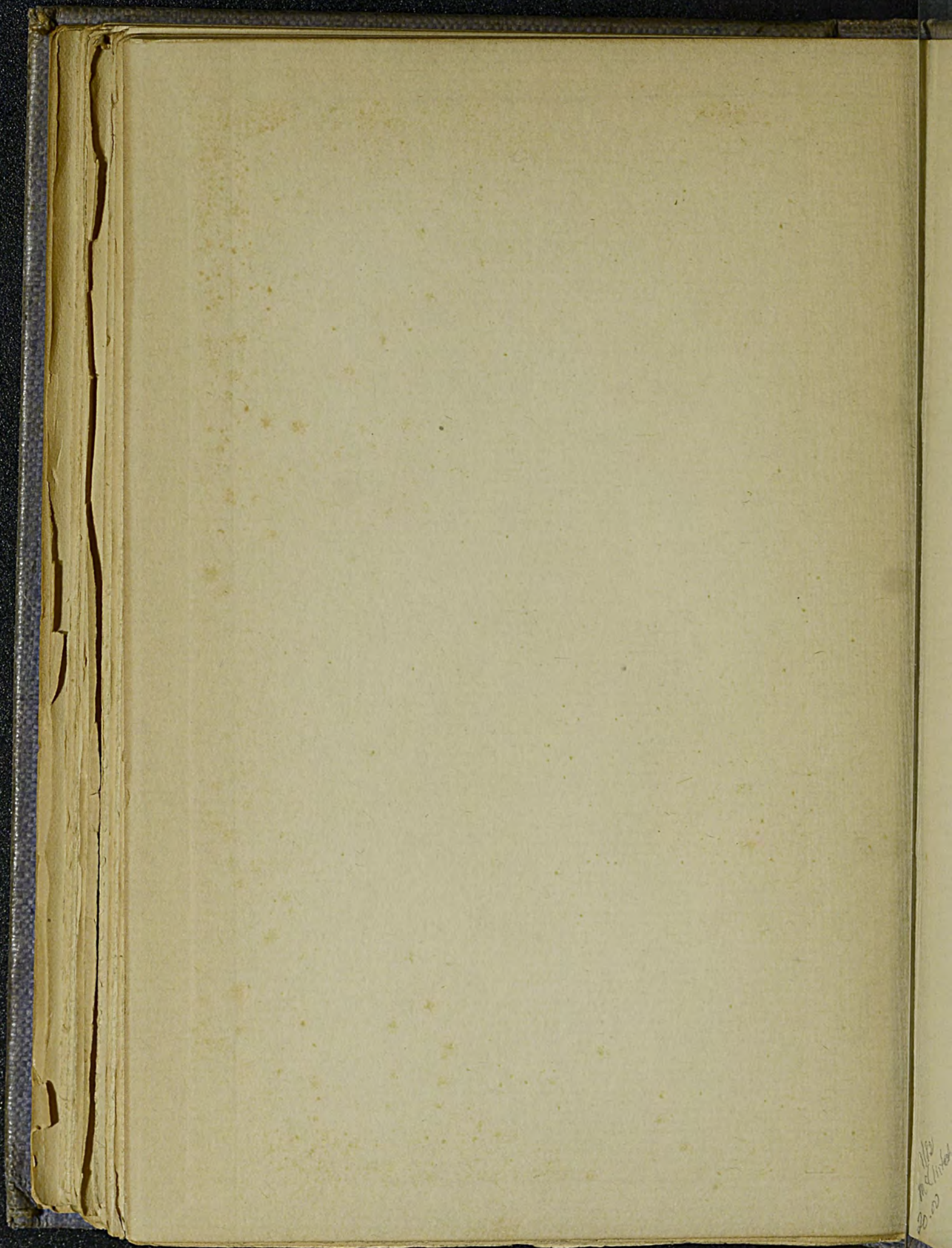
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poignant, and unstring me for daily life for many days after. Yet now and again, at rare intervals, I do so ; and then I draw from its secret place the lovely likeness that my own hands drew, and dream over again the dream that was my truest, highest life.

Heu ! quanto minus est
Cum reliquis versari
Quam
TUI meminisse !

THE END.

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