

CHAPTER XXII

THE EVIL GATE

Such was the end of the diary of Stella.

Morris shut the book with something like a sob. Then he rose and began to tramp up and down the length of the long, lonely room, while thoughts, crowded, confused, and overwhelming, pressed in upon his mind. What a woman was this whom he had lost! Who had known another so pure, so spiritual? Surely she did not belong to this world, and therefore her last prayer was so quickly answered, therefore Heaven took her. Many reading those final pages might have said with the philosopher she imagined that the shock of love and the sorrow of separation had turned her brain, and that she was mad. For who, so such might argue, would think that person otherwise than mad who dared to translate into action, and on earth to set up as a ruling star, that faith which day by day their lips professed.

Yet it would seem after that this "dreamer and mystic" Stella believed in nothing which our religion, accepted by millions without cavil, does not promise to its votaries. Its revelations and rewards marked the extremest limits of her fantasy; immortality of the personal soul, its foundation stone, was the rock on which she built. A heaven where there is no earthly marriage, but where each may consort with the souls most loved and most desired; where all sorrows are forgotten, all tears

are wiped away, all purposes made clear, reserved for those who deny themselves, do their duty, and seek forgiveness of their sins--this heaven conceived by Stella, is it not vowed to us in the pages of the Gospel? Is it not vowed again and again, sometimes with more detail, sometimes with less; sometimes in open, simple words, sometimes wrapped in the mystic allegory of the visions of St. John; but everywhere and continually held before us as our crown and great reward? And the rest, such things as her belief in guardian angels, and that it had been given to her mortal eyes to behold and commune with a beloved ghost, is there not ample warrant for them in those inspired writings? Were not the dead seen of many in Jerusalem on the night of fear, and are we not told of "ministering spirits sent forth to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation?" and of the guardian angels, who look continually upon the Father?

Now it all grew clear to Morris. In Stella he beheld an example of the doctrines of Christianity really inspiring the daily life of the believer. If her strong faith animated all those who served under that banner, then in like circumstances they would act as she had acted. They would have no doubts; their fears would vanish; their griefs be comforted, and, to a great extent, even the promptings and passions of their mortality would be trodden under foot. With Stella they would be ready to neglect the temporary in their certainty of the eternal, and even to welcome death, to them in truth, and not in mere convention, the Gate of Life.

Many things are promised to those who can achieve faith. Stella achieved it and became endued with some portion of the promise. Spiritual faith, not inherited, nor accepted, but hard-won by personal struggle and experience; that was the key-note to her character and the explanation of her actions. Yet that faith, when examined into, was nothing exotic; no combination of mysticism and mummery, but one founded upon the daily creed of the English and its fellow churches, and understood and applied to the circumstances of a life which was as brief as it seemed to be unfortunate. This was Morris's discovery, open and obvious enough, and yet at first until he grew accustomed to it, a thing marvellous in his eyes; one, moreover, in which he found comfort; since surely that straight but simple path was such as his feet might follow.

And she loved him. Oh! how she had loved him. There could be no doubt; there were her words written in that book, not hastily spoken beneath the pressure of some sudden wind of feeling, but set down in black and white, thought over, reasoned out, and recorded. And then their purport. They were a paean of passion, but the dirge of its denial. They dwelt upon the natural hopes of woman only to put them by.

"Yet how can I choke the truth and tread down the human heart within me? Oh! the road that my naked feet must tread is full of thorns, and heavy the cross that I must bear. . . . So I go to my marriage, such as it is, so I bend my back to the burden, so I bow my head to the storm, and through it all I thank God for what He has been pleased to send me. I may seem poor, but how rich I am who have been dowered with a love that

I know to be eternal as my eternal soul."

That was her creed, those were the teachings of her philosophy. And this was the woman who had loved him, who died loving him. Her very words came back, spoken but a few seconds before the end:--"Remember every word which I have said to you. Remember that we are wed--truly wed; that I go to wait for you, and that even if you do not see me, I will, if I may, be near you always."

"I go to wait for you. I will be near you always." Here was another inspiration. For three years or more he had been thinking of her as dead. Or rather he had thought of her in that nebulous, undefined fashion in which we consider the dead; the slumberous people who forget everything, who see nothing; who, if they exist at all, are like stones upon the beach rolled to and fro blind and senseless, not of their own desire, but by the waves of a fearful fate that itself is driven on with the strength of a secret storm of Will. And this fate some call the Breath of God, and some the working of a soulless force that compels the universe, past, present, and to be.

But was this view as real as it is common? If Stella were right, if our religion were right, it must be most wrong. That religion told us that the Master of mankind descended into Hades to preach to the souls of men. Did he preach to dumb, ocean-driven stones, to frozen forms and fossils who had once been men, or to spirits, changed, but active and existent?

Stella, too, had walked in the valley of doubt, by the path which all who think must tread; it was written large in the book of her life. But she had not fainted there; she had lived through its thunder-rains, its arid blasts of withering dust, its quivering quicksands, and its mirage-like meadows gay with deceitful, poisonous flowers. At last she had reached the mountain slopes of Truth to travel up them higher--ever higher, till she won their topmost peak, where the sun shone undimmed and the pure air blew; whence the world seemed far away and heaven very near. Yes, and from that heaven she had called down the spirit of her lost sister, and thenceforward was content and sure.

She had called down the spirit of her sister. Was it not written in the pages which she thought that no eye but hers would see?

Well, if such spirits were, hers--Stella's--must be also. And if they could be made apparent, why should not hers share their qualities?

Morris paused in his swift walk and trembled: "I will be near you always." For aught he knew she was near him now--present, perhaps, in this very room. While she was still in life, what were her aspirations? This was one of them, he remembered, as it fell from her lips: "Still to be with those whom I have loved on earth, although they cannot see me; to soothe their sorrows, to support their weakness, to lull their fears." And if this were so; if any power were given her to fulfil her will, whom would she sooner visit than himself?

Stay! That was her wish on earth, while she was a woman. But would she still wish it afterwards? The spirit was not the flesh, the spirit could see and be sure, while the flesh must be content with deductions and hazardings. If she could see, she would know him as he was; every failing, every secret infirmity, every infidelity of heart, might be an open writing to her eyes. And then would she not close that book in horror?

A great writer has said in effect that no man would dare to affront the ears of his fellows--men much worse than himself perhaps--with the true details of his hidden history. Knowing all the truth, they would shrink from him. How much more then at such sights and sounds would a pure spirit, washed clean of every taint of earth, fly from his soiled presence, wailing and aghast? Nay, men are hypocrites, who, in greater or less degree, themselves practice the very sins that shock them, but spirits, knowing all, would forgive all. They are above hypocrisy. If the Lord of spirits can weigh the "dust whereof we are made" and still be merciful, shall his bright messengers trample it in scorn and hate? Will they not also consider the longings of the heart and its uprightness, and be pitiful towards the failings of the flesh? Would Stella hate him because he remained as he was made--as herself she might once have been? Because having no wings with which to rule the air he must still tramp onwards through the foetid, clinging mud of earth?

Oh! how he longed to see her, that he might win her faith; win it beyond

all doubt by the evidence of his earthly eyes and senses. "If I die, search and you shall see," she had once said to him, and then added, "No, do not search, but wait." Wait! How could he wait? "At your death I will be with you." Why he might live another fifty years! That book of her recorded thoughts had aroused in him such a desire for the sight, or at least the actual knowledge of her continued being, that his blood was aflame as with a madness. And yet how should he search?

"Stella," he whispered, "come to me, Stella!" But no Stella came; no wings rustled, no breath stirred; the empty room was as the room had been. Its silence seemed to mock him. Those who slept beneath its marble floor were not more silent.

Was he mad that he should claim the power to work this miracle--to charm the dead back through the Gates of Death as Orpheus charmed Eurydice? Yet Stella did this thing--but how? He turned to the volume and page of her diary which dealt with the drawing down of Gudrun. Yes, here she spoke of continual efforts and of "that long, long preparation"--of prayer and fasting also. Here, too, was the whole secret summed up in a dozen words: "To see a spirit one must grow akin to spirits." Well, it could be done, and he would do it. But look further on where she said: "I shall call her back no more, lest the thing should get the mastery of me, and I become unfitted for my work on earth. . . . I will stop while there is yet time, while I am still mistress of my mind, and have the strength to deny myself this awful joy."

Was there not a warning in these words, and in those other words: "No, do not search, but wait." Surely they told of risk to him who, being yet on earth, dared to lift a corner of the veil which separates flesh and spirit. "Should get the mastery of me." If he saw her once would he be able to do as Stella did, and by an effort of his will separate himself from a communion so fearful yet so sweet? "Unfitted for my work." Supposing that it did get the mastery of him, would he not also be unfitted for his work on earth?

His work? What work had he now? It seemed to be done; for attending scientific meetings, receiving dividends, playing the country squire's only son and the wealthy host whilst awaiting the title which Mary wished for--these things are not work, and somehow his days were so arranged that he was never allowed to go beyond them. All further researches and experiments were discouraged. What did it matter if he were unfitted for that which he could no longer do? His work was finished. There it stood before him in that box, stamped "Monk's aerophone. The Twin. No. 3412."

No; he had but one ambition left. To pierce the curtain of thick night and behold her who was lost to him; her who loved him as man had been seldom loved.

The fierce temptation struck him as a sudden squall strikes a ship with all her canvas spread. For a moment mast and rigging stood the strain, then they went by the board. He would do it if it killed him; but the

task must be undertaken properly, deliberately, and above all in secret. To-morrow he would begin. When he had satisfied himself; when he had seen; then he could always stop.

A few minutes later Morris stood beside his wife's bed. There she lay, in the first perfection of young motherhood and beauty, a lovely, white-wrapped vision with straying golden hair; her sweet, rounded face pink with the flush of sleep, and the long lashes lying like little shadows on her cheek.

Morris looked at her, and his doubts returned. What would Stella say? he thought to himself. It almost seemed to him that he could hear her voice, bidding him forbear; bidding him render unto his wife those things which were his wife's: all honour, loyalty, and devotion. If he entered on this course could he still render them? Was there not such a thing as moral infidelity, and did not such exercises as he proposed partake of its nature? Perhaps, perhaps. On the whole it might be well to put all this behind him.

It was three o'clock, he was tired out, and must sleep. The morning would be a more fitting time to ponder such weighty questions of the unwritten matrimonial law.

In due course, the morning came--indeed, it was not far off--and with it wiser counsels. Mary woke early and talked about the baby, which was teething; indeed, so soon as the nurse was up she sent for it that the

three of them might hold a consultation over a swollen gum. Also she discussed the date of their departure to Beaulieu, for again Christmas was near at hand; adding, however, somewhat to Morris's relief, that unless the baby's teeth went on better she really did not think that they could go, as it would be most unwise to take her out of the care of Dr. Charters and trust her to the tender mercies of foreign leeches. Morris agreed that it might be risky, and mentioned that in a letter which he had received from the concierge at Beaulieu a few days before, that functionary said that the place was overrun with measles and scarlatina.

"Morris!" ejaculated Mary, sitting bolt upright in bed, "and you never told me! What is more, had it not been for baby's teeth, which brought it to your mind, I believe you never would have told me, and I might have taken those unprotected little angels and--Oh! goodness, I can't bear to think of it."

Morris muttered some apologies, whereon Mary, looking at him suspiciously through her falling hair, asked:

"Why did you forget to show me the letter? Did you suppress it because you wanted to go to Beaulieu?"

"No," answered Morris with energy; "I hate Beaulieu. I forgot, that is all; because I have so much to think about, I suppose."

"So much? I thought that things were arranged now so that you had nothing at all to think about except how to spend your money and be happy with me, and adore the dear angels--Yes, I think that perhaps the nurse had better take her away. Touch the bell, will you? There, she's gone. Keep her well wrapped up, and mind the draught, nurse.

"No, don't get up yet, Morris; I want to talk to you. You have been very gloomy of late, just like you used to be before you married, mooning about and staring at nothing. And what on earth do you do sitting up to all hours of the morning in that ghostly old chapel, where I wouldn't be alone at twelve o'clock for a hundred pounds?"

"I read," said Morris.

"Read? Read what? Novels?"

"Sometimes," answered Morris.

"Oh, how can you tell such fibs? Why, that last book by Lady What's-her-name which came in the Mudie box--the one they say is so improper--has been lying on your table for over two months, and you can't tell me yet what it was the heroine did wrong. Morris, you are not inventing anything more, are you?"

Here was an inspiration. "I admit that I am thinking of a little thing," he said with diffidence, as though he were a budding poet with a sonnet

on his mind.

"A little thing? What little thing?"

"Well, a new kind of aerophone designed to work uninfluenced by its twin."

"Well, and why shouldn't it? Everything can't have a twin--only I suppose there would be nothing to hear."

"That's just the point," replied Morris in his old professional manner.

"I think there would be plenty to hear if only I could make the machine sensitive to the sounds and capable of reproducing them."

"What sounds?" asked Mary.

"Well, if, for instance, one could successfully insulate it from the earth noises, the sounds which permeate space, and even those that have their origin upon the surfaces of the planets and perhaps of the more distant stars."

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Mary, "imagine a man who can want to let loose upon our poor little world every horrible noise that happens in the stars. Why, what under heaven would be the use of it?"

"Well, one might communicate with them. Conceivably even one might hear

the speech of their inhabitants, if they have any; always presuming that such an instrument could be made, and that it can be successfully insulated."

"Hear the speech of their inhabitants! That is your old idea, but you will never succeed, that's one blessing. Morris, I suspect you; you want to stop at home here to work at this horrible new machine; to work for years, and years, and years without the slightest result. I suppose that you didn't invent that about the measles and the scarlatina, did you? The two of them together sound rather clumsy, as though you might have done so."

"Not a bit, upon my honour," answered Morris. "I will go and get the letter," and, not sorry to escape from further examination, he went.

Whether the cause were Mary's doubts and reproaches, or the infant's gums, or the working of his own conscience,--he felt that a man with a teething baby has no right to cultivate the occult. For quite a long period, a whole fortnight, indeed, Morris steadily refrained from any attempt to fulfil his dangerous ambition to "pierce the curtain of thick night." Only he read and re-read Stella's diary--that secret, fascinating work which in effect was building a wall between him and the healthy, common instincts of the world--till he knew whole pages of it by heart. Also he began a series of experiments whereof the object was to produce an improved and more sensitive aerophone.

That any instrument which the intellect of man could produce would really succeed in conveying sounds which, if they exist at all, are born in the vast cosmic areas that envelope our earth and its atmosphere, he believed to be most improbable. Still, such a thing was possible, for what is not? Moreover, the world itself as it rushes on its fearful journey across the depths of space has doubtless many voices that have not yet been heard by the ears of men, some of which he might be able to discover and record. At the least he stood upon the threshold of a new knowledge, and now a great desire arose in him to pass its doors, if so he might, for who could tell what he would learn or see behind them? And by degrees, as he worked, always with one ulterior object in his mind, his scruples vanished or were mastered by the growth of his longing, till this became his ruling passion--to behold the spirit of Stella. Now he no longer reasoned with himself, but openly, nakedly, in his own heart gave his will over to the achievement of this monstrous and unnatural end.

How was it to be done? That was now the sole dilemma which tormented him--as the possible methods of obtaining the drink he craves, or the drug that gives him peace and radiant visions, torment the dipsomaniac or the morphia victim in his guarded prison. He thought of his instruments, those magic machines with the working of which Stella had been familiar in her life. He even poured petitions into them in the hope that these might be delivered far beyond the ken of man, only to learn that he was travelling a road which led to a wall impassable; the wall that, for the lack of a better name, we call Death, which bars the

natural from the spiritual.

Wonderful as were his electrical appliances, innumerable as might be their impalpable emanations, insoluble as seemed the mystery of their power of catching and transmitting sounds by the agency of ether, they were still physical appliances producing physical effects in obedience to the laws of nature. But what he sought lay beyond nature and was subject to some rule of which he did not even know the elements, and much less the axioms. Herein his instruments, or indeed, any that man could make, were as futile and as useless as would be the prayers of an archbishop addressed to a Mumbo-jumbo in a fetish house. The link was wanting; there was, and could be, no communication between the two. The invisible ether which he had subdued to his purposes was still a constituent part of the world of matter; he must discover the spiritual ether, and discover also the animating force by which it might be influenced.

Now he formed a new plan--to reach the dead by his petitions, by the invocation of his own spirit. "Seek me and you shall find me," she had said. So he sought and called in bitterness and concentration of heart, but still he did not find. Stella did not come.

He was in despair. She had promised, and her promise seemed to be broken. Then it was that in turning the pages of her diary he came across a passage that had escaped him, or which he had forgotten. It ran thus:

"In the result I have learned this, that we cannot compel the departed to appear. Even if they hear us they will not, or are not suffered to obey. If we would behold them we must create the power of vision in our own natures. They are about us always, only we cannot see or feel their presence; our senses are too gross. To succeed we must refine our senses until they acquire an aptitude beyond the natural. Then without any will or any intervention on their parts, we may triumph, perhaps even when they do not know that we have triumphed."