

## CHAPTER XXIII

### STELLA COMES

Now, by such arts as are known to those who have studied mysticism in any of its protean forms, Morris set himself to attempt communication with the unseen. In their practice these arts are as superlatively unwholesome as in their result, successful or not, they are unnatural. Also, they are very ancient. The Chaldeans knew them, and the magicians who stood before Pharaoh knew them. To the early Christian anchorites and to the gnostics they were familiar. In one shape or another, ancient wonder-workers, Scandinavian and mediaeval seers, modern Spiritualists, classical interpreters of oracles, Indian fakirs, savage witch-doctors and medicine men, all submitted or submit themselves to the yoke of the same rule in the hope of attaining an end which, however it may vary in its manifestations, is identical in essence.

This is the rule: to beat down the flesh and its instincts and nurture the spirit, its aspirations and powers. And this is the end--to escape before the time, if only partially and at intervals, into an atmosphere of vision true or false, where human feet were meant to find no road, and the trammelled minds of men no point of outlook. That such an atmosphere exists even materialists would hesitate to deny, for it is proved by the whole history of the moral world, and especially by that of the religions of the world, their founders, their prophets and their exponents, many of whom have breathed its ether, and pronounced it the

very breath of life. Their feet have walked the difficult path; standing on those forbidden peaks they have scanned the dim plains and valleys of the unseen, and made report of the dreams and shapes that haunt them. Then the busy hordes of men beneath for a moment pause to listen and are satisfied.

"Lo, here is Truth," they cry, "now we may cease from troubling." So for a while they rest till others answer, "Nay, this is Truth; our teacher told it us from yonder mountain, the only Holy Hill." And yet others fall upon them and slay them, shouting, "Neither of these is Truth. She dwells not among the precipices, but in the valley; there we have heard her accents."

And still from cliff to cliff and along the secret vales echoes the voice of Truth; and still upon the snow-wreathed peaks and across the space of rolling ocean, and even among the populous streets of men, veiled, mysterious, and changeful, her shape is seen by those who have trained themselves or been inspired to watch and hear. But no two see the same shape, and no two hear the same voice, since to each she wears a different countenance, and speaks with another tongue. For Truth is as the sand of the shore for number, and as the infinite hues of the rainbow for variety. Yet the sand is ground out of one mother rock, and all the colours of earth and air are born of a single sun.

So, practising the ancient rites and mysteries, and bowing himself to the ancient law whose primeval principles every man and woman may find

graven upon the tablets of their solitary heart, Morris set himself to find that truth, which for him was hid in the invisible soul of Stella, the soul which he desired to behold and handle, even if the touch and sight should slay him.

Day by day he worked, for as many hours as he could make his own, at the details of his new experiments. These in themselves were interesting, and promised even to be fruitful; but that was not his object, or, at any rate, his principal object in pursuing them with such an eager passion of research. The talk and hazardings which had passed between himself and Stella notwithstanding, both reason and experience had taught him already that all instruments made by the hand of man were useless to break a way into the dwellings of the departed. A day might come when they would enable the inhabitants of the earth to converse with the living denizens of the most distant stars; but never, never with the dead. He laboured because of the frame of thought his toil brought with it, but still more that he might be alone: that he might be able to point to his soiled hands, the shabby clothes which he wore when working with chemicals or at the forge, the sheets of paper covered with half-finished and maddening calculations, as an excuse why he should not be taken out, or, worse still, dragged from his home to stay for nights, or perhaps whole weeks, in other places. Even his wife, he felt, would relent at the sight of those figures, and would fly from the odour of chemicals.

In fact, Mary did both, for she hated what she called "smells," and

a place strewn with hot irons and bottles of acids, which, as she discovered, if disturbed burnt both dress and fingers. The sight also of algebraic characters pursuing each other across quires of paper, like the grotesque forces of some broken, impish army, filled her indolent mind with a wondering admiration that was akin to fear. The man, she reflected, who could force those cabalistic symbols to reveal anything worth knowing must indeed be a genius, and one who deserved not to be disturbed, even for a tea party.

Although she disapproved deeply of these renewed studies, such was Mary's secret thought. Whether it would have sufficed alone to persuade her to permit them is another matter, since her instinct, keen and subtle as any of Morris's appliances, warned her that in them lay danger to her home and happiness. But just then, as it happened, there were other matters to occupy her mind. The baby became seriously ill over its teething, and, other infantile complications following, for some weeks it was doubtful whether she would survive.

Now Mary belonged to the class of woman which is generally known as "motherly," and adored her offspring almost to excess. Consequently for those weeks she found plenty to think about without troubling herself over-much as to Morris and his experiments. For these same reasons, perhaps, she scarcely noticed, seated as she was some distance away at the further end of the long table, how very ethereal her husband's appetite had become, or that, although he took wine as usual, it was a mere pretence, since he never emptied his glass. The most loving of

women can scarcely be expected to consider a man's appetite when that of a baby is in question, or, while the child wastes, to take note whether or no its father is losing flesh. Lastly, as regards the hours at which he came to bed, being herself a sound sleeper Mary had long since ceased to interest herself about them, on the wise principle that so long as she was not expected to sit up it was no affair of hers.

Thus it happened that Morris worked and meditated by day, and by night--ah! who that has not tried to climb this difficult and endless Jacob's ladder resting upon the earth and losing itself far, far away in the blue of heaven above, can understand what he did by night? But those who have stood even on its lowest rung will guess, and--for the rest it does not matter.

He advanced; he knew that he advanced, that the gross wall of sense was wearing thin beneath the attacks of his out-thrown soul; that even if they were not drawn, from time to time the black curtains swung aside in the swift, pure breath of his continual prayers. Moreover, the dead drew near to him at moments, or he drew near the dead. Even in his earthly brain he could feel their awful presence as wave by wave soft, sweet pulses of impression beat upon him and passed through him. Through and through him they passed till his brow ached, and every nerve of his body tingled, as though it had become the receiver of some mysterious current that stirred his blood with what was not akin to it, and summoned to his mind strange memories and foresights. Visions came also that he could not define, to slip from his frantic grasp like wet sand through the

fingers of a drowning man. More and more frequently, and with an ever increasing completeness, did this unearthly air, blowing from a shore no human foot has trod, breathe through his being and possess him, much as some faint wind which we cannot feel may be seen to possess an aspen tree so that it turns white and shivers when every other natural thing is still. And as that aspen turns white and shivers in this thin, impalpable air, so did his spirit blanch and quiver with joy and dread mingled mysteriously in the cup of his expectant soul.

Again and again those sweet, yet sickening waves flowed over him, to leave him shaken and unnerved. At first they were rare visitors, single clouds floating across his calm, coming he knew not whence and vanishing he knew not whither. Now they drove in upon him like some scud, ample yet broken, before the wind, till at whiles, as it were, he could not see the face of the friendly, human sun. Then he was like a traveller lost in the mist upon a mountain top, sure of nothing, feeling precipices about him, hearing voices calling him, seeing white arms stretched out to lead him, yet running forward gladly because amid so many perils a fate was in his feet.

Now, too, they came with an actual sense of wind. He would wake up at night even by his wife's side and feel this unholy breath blowing ice-cold on his brow and upon the backs of his outstretched hands. Yet if he lit a candle it had no power to stir its flame; yes, while it still blew sharp upon him the flame of the candle did not move. Then the wind would cease, and within him the intangible, imponderable power

would arise, and the voices would speak like the far, far, murmur of a stream, and the thoughts which he could not weigh or interpret would soak into his being like some strange dew, and, soft, soft as falling snow, invisible feet would tread the air about him, till of a sudden a door in his brain seemed to shut, and he woke to the world again.

Every force is subject to laws. Even if they were but the emanations of an incipient madness which like all else have their origins, destinies, and forms, these possessing vapours were a force, which in time Morris, whose mind from a lifelong training was scientific and methodical, accustomed, moreover, to struggle for dominion over elements unknown or imperfectly appreciated, learned to regulate if not entirely to control. Their visits were pleasant to him, a delight even; but to experience this joy to the utmost he discovered that their power must be concentrated; that if the full effect was to be produced this moral morphia must be taken in strong doses, and at stated intervals, sufficient space being allowed between them to give his mental being time to recuperate. Science has proved that even the molecules of a wire can grow fatigued by the constant passage of electricity, or the edge of a razor by too frequent stropping. Both of them, to be effective, to do their utmost service, must have periods of rest.

Here, then, his will came to his aid, for he found that by its strong, concentrated exertion he was enabled both to shut off the sensations or to excite them. Another thing he found also--that after a while it was impossible to do without them. For a period the anticipation of their

next visit would buoy him up; but if it were baulked too long, then reaction set in, and with it the horrors of the Pit.

This was the first stage of his insanity--or of his vision.

Dear as such manifestations might be to him, in time he wearied of them; these hints which but awakened his imagination, these fantastic spiced meats which, without staying it, only sharpened his spiritual appetite. More than ever he longed to see and to know, to make acquaintance with the actual presence, whereof they were but the forerunners, the cold blasts that go before the storm, the vague, mystical draperies which veiled the unearthly goddess at whose shrine he was a worshipper. He desired the full fierce fury of the tempest, the blinding flash of the lightning, the heavy hiss of the rain, the rush of the winds bursting on him from the four horizons; he desired the naked face of his goddess.

And she came--or he acquired the power to see her, whichever it might be. She came suddenly, unexpectedly, completely, as a goddess should.

It was on Christmas Eve, at night, the anniversary of Stella's death four years before. Morris and his wife were alone at the Abbey, as the Colonel had gone for a fortnight or so to Beaulieu, just to keep the house aired, as he explained. Also Lady Rawlins was there with her husband, the evil-tempered man who by a single stroke of sickness had

been converted into a babbling imbecile, harmless as a babe, and amused for the most part with such toys as are given to babes. She, so Morris understood, had intimated that Sir Jonah was failing, really failing quickly, and that in her friendlessness at a foreign place, especially at Christmas time, she would be thankful to have the comfort of an old friend's presence. This the old friend, who, having been back from town for a whole month, was getting rather bored with Monksland and the sick baby, determined to vouchsafe, explaining that he knew that young married people liked to be left to each other now and again, especially when they were worried with domestic troubles. Lady Rawlins was foolish and fat, but, as the Colonel remembered, she was fond. Where, indeed, could another woman be found who would endure so much scientific discipline and yet be thankful? Also, within a few weeks, after the expected demise of Jonah, she would be wondrous wealthy--that he knew. Therefore it seemed that the matter was worth consideration--and a journey to Beaulieu.

So the Colonel went, and Morris, more and more possessed by his monomania, was glad that he had gone. His absence gave him greater opportunities of loneliness; it was now no longer necessary that he should sit at night smoking with his father, or, rather, watching him smoke at the expense of so many precious hours when he should be up and doing.

Morris and Mary dined *tete-a-tete* that evening, but almost immediately after dinner she had gone to the nurseries. The baby was now threatened

with convulsions, and a trained nurse had been installed. But, as Mary did not in the least trust the nurse, who, according to her account, was quite unaccustomed to children, she insisted upon dogging that functionary's footsteps. Therefore, Morris saw little of her.

It was one o'clock on Christmas morning, or more. Hours ago Morris had gone through his rites, the ritual that he had invented or discovered--in its essence, simple and pathetic enough--whereby he strove to bring himself to the notice of the dead, and to fit himself to see or hear the dead. Such tentative mysticism as served his turn need not be written down, but its substance can be imagined by many. Then, through an exercise of his will, he had invoked the strange, trance-like state which has been described. The soft waves flowing from an unknown source had beat upon his brain, and with them came the accustomed phenomena; the sense of some presence near, impending, yet impotent; suggesting by analogy and effect the misdirected efforts of a blind person seeking something in a room, or the painful attempt of one almost deaf, striving to sift out words from a confused murmur of sounds. The personality of Stella seemed to pervade him, yet he could see nothing, could hear nothing. The impression might be from within, not from without. Perhaps, after all, it was nothing but a dream, a miasma, a mirage, drawn by his own burning thought from the wastes and marshes of his mind peopled with illusive hopes and waterlogged by memories. Or it might be true and real; as yet he could not be certain of its origin.

The fit passed, delightful in its overpowering emptiness, but unsatisfying as all that had gone before it, and left him weak. For a while Morris crouched by the fire, for he had grown cold, and could not think accurately. Then his vital, human strength returned, and, as seemed to him to be fitting upon this night of all nights, he began one by one to recall the events of that day four years ago, when Stella was still a living woman.

The scene in the Dead Church, the agonies of farewell; he summoned them detail by detail, word by word; her looks, the changes of her expression, the movements of her hands and eyes and lips; he counted and pictured each precious souvenir. The sound of her last sentences also, as the blind, senseless aeroplane had rendered them just before the end, one by one they were repeated in his brain. There stood the very instrument; but, alas! it was silent now, its twin lay buried in the sea with her who had worked it.

Morris grew weary, the effort of memory was exhausting, and after it he was glad to think of nothing. The fire flickered, the clear light of the electric lamps shone upon the hard, sixteenth-century faces of the painted angels in the ancient roof; without the wind soughed, and through it rose the constant, sullen roar of the sea.

Tired, disappointed, unhappy, and full of self-reproaches, for when the madness was not on him he knew his sin, Morris sank into a doze. Now

music crept softly into his sleep; sweet, thrilling music, causing him to open his eyes and smile. It was Christmas Eve, and doubtless he heard the village waifs.

Morris looked up arousing himself to listen, and lo! there before him, unexpected and ineffable, was Stella; Stella as she appeared that night on which she had sung to him, just as she finished singing, indeed, when he stood for a while in the faint moonlight, the flame of inspiration still flickering in those dark eyes and the sweet lips drawn down a little as though she were about to weep.

The sight did not astonish him, at the moment he never imagined even then that this could be her spirit, that his long labours in a soil no man was meant to till had issued into harvest. Surely it was a dream, nothing but a dream. He felt no tremors, no cold wind stirred his hair; his heart did not stand still, nor his breath come short. Why should a man fear so beautiful a dream? Yet, vaguely enough, he wished that it might last forever, for it was sweet to see her so--as she had been.

As she had been--yet, was she ever thus? Surely some wand of change had touched her. She was beautiful, but had she worn that beauty? And those eyes! Could any such have shone in the face of woman?

"Stella," he whispered, and from roof and walls crept back the echo of his voice. He rose and went towards her. She had vanished. He returned, and there she was.

"Speak!" he muttered; "speak!" But no word came, only the lovely changeless eyes shone on and watched him.

Listen! Music seemed to float about the room, such music as he had never heard--even Stella could not make the like. The air was full of it, the night without was full of it, millions of voices took up the chant, and from far away, note by note, mighty organs and silver trumpets told its melody.

His brain reeled. In the ocean of those unimagined harmonies it was tossed like a straw upon a swirling river, tossed and overwhelmed.

Slowly, very slowly, as the straw might be sucked into the heart of a whirlpool, his soul was drawn down into blackness. It shuddered, it was afraid; this vision of a whirlpool haunted him. He could see the narrow funnel of its waters, smooth, shining like jet, unspecked by foam, solid to all appearances; but, as he was aware, alive, every atom of them, instinct with some frightful energy, the very face of force--and in the teeth of it, less than a dead leaf, himself.

Down he went, down, and still above him shone the beautiful, pitying, changeless eyes; and still round him echoed that strange, searching music. The eyes receded, the music became faint, and then--blackness.