

CHAPTER XXIV

DREAMS AND THE SLEEP

The Christmas Day which followed this strange night proved the happiest that Morris could ever remember to have spent since his childhood. In his worldly circumstances of course he was oppressed by none of the everyday worries which at this season are the lot of most--no duns came to trouble him, nor through lack of means was he forced to turn any beggar from his door. Also the baby was much better, and Mary's spirits were consequently radiant. Never, indeed, had she been more lovely and charming than when that morning she presented him with a splendid gold chronometer to take the place of the old silver watch which was his mother's as a girl, and that he had worn all his life. Secretly he sorrowed over parting with that familiar companion in favour of its new eighty-guinea rival, although it was true that it always lost ten minutes a day, and sometimes stopped altogether. But there was no help for it; so he kissed Mary and was grateful.

Moreover, the day was beautiful. In the morning they walked to church through the Abbey plantations, which run for nearly half a mile along the edge of the cliff. The rime lay thick upon the pines and firs--every little needle had its separate coat of white whereon the sun's rays glistened. The quiet sea, too, shone like some gigantic emerald, and in the sweet stillness the song of a robin perched upon the bending bough of a young poplar sounded pure and clear.

Yet it was not this calm and plenty, this glittering ocean flecked with white sails, and barred by delicate lines of smoke, this blue and happy sky, nor all the other good things that were given to him in such abundance, which steeped his heart in Sabbath rest. Although he sought no inspiration from such drugs, and, indeed, was a stranger to them, rather was his joy the joy of the opium-eater while the poison works; the joy of him who after suffering long nights of pain has found their antidote, and perhaps for the first time appreciates the worth of peace, however empty. His troubled heart had ceased its striving, his wrecked nerves were still, his questionings had been answered, his ends were attained; he had drunk of the divine cup which he desired, and its wine flowed through him. The dead had visited him, and he had tasted of the delight which lies hid in death. On that day he felt as though nothing could hurt him any more, nothing could even move him. The angry voices, the wars, the struggles, the questionings--all the things which torment mankind; what did they matter? He had forced the lock and broken the bar; if only for a little while, the door had opened, and he had seen that which he desired to see and sought with all his soul, and with the wondrous harvest of this pure, inhuman passion, that owes nothing to sex, or time, or earth, he was satisfied at last.

"Why did you look so strange in church?" asked Mary as they walked home, and her voice echoed in the spaces of his void mind as words echo in an empty hall.

His thoughts were wandering far, and with difficulty he drew them back, as birds tied by the foot are drawn back and, still fluttering to be free, brought home to the familiar cage.

"Strange, dear?" he answered; "did I look strange?"

"Yes; like a man in a dream or the face of a saint being comfortably martyred in a picture. Morris, I believe that you are not well. I will speak to the doctor. He must give you a tonic, or something for your liver. Really, to see you and that old mummy Mr. Fregelius staring at each other while he murmured away about the delights of the world to come, and how happy we ought to be at the thought of getting there, made me quite uncomfortable."

"Why? Why, dear?" asked Morris, vacantly.

"Why? Because the old man with his pale face and big eyes looked more like an astral body than a healthy human being; if I met him in his surplice at night, I should think he was a ghost, and upon my word, you are catching the same expression. That comes of your being so much together. Do be a little more human and healthy. Lose your temper; swear at the cook like your father; admire Jane Rose's pretty bonnet, or her pretty face; take to horse-racing, do anything that is natural, even if it is wicked. Anything that doesn't make one think of graves, and stars, and infinities, and souls who died last night; of all of which no doubt we shall have plenty in due season."

"All right, dear," answered Morris, with a fine access of forced cheerfulness, "we will have some champagne for dinner and play picquet after it."

"Champagne! What's the use of champagne when you only pretend to drink it and fill up the glass with soda-water? Picquet! You hate it, and so do I; and it is silly losing large sums of money to each other which we never mean to pay. That isn't the real thing, there's no life in that. Oh, Morris, if you love me, do cultivate some human error. It is terrible to have a husband in whom there is nothing to reform."

"I will try, love," said Morris, earnestly.

"Yes," she replied, with a gloomy shake of the head, "but you won't succeed. When Mrs. Roberts told me the other day that she was afraid her husband was taking to drink because he went out walking too often with that pretty widow from North Cove--the one with the black and gold bonnet whom they say things about--I answered that I quite envied her, and she didn't in the least understand what I meant. But I understand, although I can't express myself."

"I give up the drink," said Morris; "it disagrees; but perhaps you might introduce me to the widow. She seems rather attractive."

"I will," answered Mary, stamping her foot. "She's a horrid, vulgar

little thing; but I'll ask her to tea, or to stay, and anything, if she can only make you look rather less disembodied."

That night the champagne appeared, and, feeling his wife's eyes upon him, Morris swallowed two whole glasses, and in consequence was quite cheerful, for he had eaten little--circumstances under which champagne exhilarates--for a little while. Then they went into the drawing-room and talked themselves into silence about nothing in particular, after which Morris began to wander round the room and contemplate the furniture as though he had never seen it before.

"What are you fidgeting about?" asked Mary. "Morris, you remind me of somebody who wants to slip away to an assignation, which in your case is absurd. I wish your father were back, I really do; I should be glad to listen to his worst and longest story. It isn't often that I sit with you, so it would be kinder if you didn't look so bored. I'm cross; I'm going to bed. I hope you will spend a pleasant night in the chapel with your thoughts and your instruments and the ghosts of the old Abbots. But please come into my room quietly; I don't like being woke up after three in the morning, as I was yesterday." And she went, slamming the door behind her.

Morris went also with hanging head and guilty step to his accustomed haunt in the old chapel. He knew that he was doing wrong; he could sympathise with Mary's indignation. Yet he was unable to resist, he must see again, must drink once more of that heavenly cup.

And he failed. Was it the champagne? Was it Mary's sharp words which had ruffled him? Was it that he had not allowed enough time for the energy which came from him enabling her to appear before his mortal eyes, to gather afresh in the life-springs of his own nature? Or was she also angry with him?

At least he failed. The waves came indeed, and the cold wind blew, but there was no sound of music, and no vision. Again and again he strove to call it up--to fancy that he saw. It was useless, and at last, weary, broken, but filled with a mad irritation such as might be felt by a hungry man who sees food which he cannot touch, or by a jealous lover who beholds her that should have been his bride take another husband before his eyes, he crept away to such rest as he could win.

He awoke, ill, wretched, and unsatisfied, but wisdom had come to him with sleep. He must not fail again, it was too wearing; he must prepare himself according to the rules which he had laid down. Also he must conciliate his wife, so that she did not speak angrily to him, and thus disturb his calm of mind. Broken waters mirror nothing; if his soul was to be the glass in which that beloved spirit might appear, it must be still and undisturbed. If? Then was she built up in his imagination, or did he really see her with his eyes? He could not tell, and after all it mattered little so long as he did see her.

He grew cunning--in such circumstances a common symptom--affecting a

"bonhomie," a joviality of demeanour, indeed, which was rather overdone. He suggested that Mary should ask some people to tea, and twice he went out shooting, a sport which he had almost abandoned. Only when she wanted to invite certain guests to stay, he demurred a little, on account of the baby, but so cleverly that she never suspected him of being insincere. In short, as he could attain his unholy end in no other way, Morris entered on a career of mild deception, designed to prevent his wife from suspecting him of she knew not what. His conduct was that of a man engaged in an intrigue. In his case, however, the possible end of his ill-doing was not the divorce-court, but an asylum, or so some observers would have anticipated. Yet did man ever adore a mistress so fatal and destroying as this poor shadow of the dead which he desired?

It was not until New Year's Eve that Stella came again. Once more enervated and exhausted by the waves, Morris sank into a doze whence, as before, he was awakened by the sound of heavenly music to which, on this night, was added the scent of perfume. Then he opened his eyes--to behold Stella. As she had been at first, so she was now, only more lovely--a hundred times lovelier than the imagination can paint, or the pen can tell. Here was nothing pale or deathlike, no sheeted, melancholy spectre, but a radiant being whose garment was the light, and whose eyes glowed like the heart of some deep jewel. About her rolled a vision of many colours, such hues as the rainbow has fell upon her face and about her hair. And yet it was the same Stella that he had known made perfect and spiritual and, beyond all imagining, divine.

Once more he addressed--implored her, and once more no answer came; nor did her face change, or that wondrous smile pass from her lips into the gravity of her eyes. This, at least, was sure; either that she no longer had any understanding knowledge of his earthly tongue, or that its demonstration was to her a thing forbidden. What was she then? That double of the body which the Egyptians called the Ka, or the soul itself, the {preuma}, no eidolon, but the immortal ego, clothed in human semblance made divine?

Why was there no answer? Because his speech was too gross for her to hearken to? Why did she not speak? Because his ears were deaf? Was this an illusion? No! a thousand times. When he approached she vanished, but what of it? He was mortal, she a spirit; they might not mix.

Yet in her own method she did speak, spoke to his soul, bidding the scales fall from its eyes so that it might see. And it saw what human imagination could not fashion. Behold those gardens, those groves that hang upon the measureless mountain face, and the white flowers which droop in tresses from the dark bough of yonder towering poplar tree, and the jewelled serpent nestling at its root.

Oh! they are gone, and when the flame-eyed Figure smote, the vast, barring, precipices fall apart and the road is smooth and open.

How far? A million miles? No, twenty thousand millions. Look, yonder shines the destined Star; now come! So, it is reached. Nay, do not stop

to stare. Look again! out through utter space to where the low light glows. So, come once more. The suns float past like windblown golden dust--like the countless lamps of boats upon the bosom of a summer sea. There, beneath, lies the very home of Power. Those springing sparks of light? They are the ineffable Decrees passing outward through infinity. That sound? It is the voice of worlds which worship.

Look now! Out yonder see the flaming gases gather and cohere. They burn out and the great globe blackens. Cool mists wrap it, rains fall, seas collect, continents arise. There is life, behold it, various and infinite. And hearken to the whisper of this great universe, one tiny note in that song of praise you heard but now. Yes, the life dies, the ball grows black again; it is the carcass of a world. How long have you watched it? For an hour, a breath; but, as you judge time, some ten thousand million years. Sleep now, you are weary; later you shall understand.

Thus the wraith of Stella spoke to his soul in visions. Presently, with drumming ears and eyes before which strange lights seemed to play, Morris staggered from the place, so weak, indeed, that he could scarcely thrust one foot before the other. Yet his heart was filled with a mad joy, and his brain was drunken with the deep cup of a delight and a knowledge that have seldom been given to man.

On other nights the visions were different. Thus he saw the spirits of men going out and returning, and among them his own slumbering spirit

that a vast and shadowy Stella bore in her arms as a mother bears a babe.

He saw also the Vision of Numbers. All the infinite inhabitants of all the infinite worlds passed before him, marching through the ages to some end unknown. Once, too, his mind was opened, and he understood the explanation of Evil and the Reason of Things. He shouted at their glorious simplicity--shouted for joy; but lo! before he rose from his chair they were forgotten.

Other visions there were without count. Also they would mix and fall into new patterns, like the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope. There was no end to them, and each was lovelier, or grander, or fraught with a more sweet entrancement, than the last. And still she who brought them, she who opened his eyes, who caused his ears to hear and his soul to see; she whom he worshipped; his heart's twin, she who had sworn herself to him on earth, and was there waiting to fulfil the oath to all eternity; the woman who had become a spirit, that spirit that had taken the shape of a woman--there she stood and smiled and changed, and yet was changeless. And oh! what did it matter if his life was draining from him, and oh! to die at those glittering feet, with that perfumed breath stirring in his hair! What did he seek more when Death would be the great immortal waking, when from twilight he passed out to light? What more when in that dawn, awful yet smiling, she should be his and he hers, and they twain would be one, with thought that answered thought, since it was the same thought?

There is much that might be told--enough to fill many pages. It would be easy, for instance, to set out long lists of the entrancing dreams which were the soul speech of the spirit of Stella, and to some extent, to picture them. Also the progress of the possession of Morris might be described and the student of his history shown, step by step, how the consummation that in her life days Stella had feared, overtook him; how "the thing got the mastery of him," and he became "unfitted for his work on earth!" How, too, his body wasted and his spiritual part developed, till every physical sight and deed became a cause of irritation to his new nature, and at times even a source of active suffering.

Thus an evil odour, the spectacle of pain, the cry of grief, the sight of the carcasses of dead animals, to take a few examples out of very many, were agonies to his abnormal, exasperated nerves. Nor did it stop there, since the misfortune which threatened Stella when at length she had succeeded in becoming bodily conscious of the presence of the eidolon of her sister, and "heard discords among the harmonies" of the rich music of her violin, overtook him also.

Thus, for instance, in the scent of the sweetest rose at times Morris would discover something frightful; even the guise of tender childhood ceased to be lovely in his eyes, for now he could see and feel the budding human brute beneath. Worse still, his beautiful companion, Mary,

fair and gracious as she was, became almost repulsive to him, so that he shrank from her as in common life some delicate-nurtured man might shrink from a full-bodied, coarse-tongued young fishwife. Even her daily need of food, which was healthy though not excessive, disgusted him to witness,--he who was out of touch with all wholesome appetites of earth, whose distorted nature sought an alien rest and solace.

Of Mary herself, also, it might be narrated how, after first mocking at the thought and next thrusting it away, by degrees she grew to appreciate the reality of the mysterious foreign influence which reigned in her home. It might be told how in that spiritual atmosphere, shedding its sleepy indolence, her own spirit awoke and grew conscious and far-seeing, till impressions and hints which in the old days she would have set aside as idle, became for her pregnant with light and meaning. Then at last her eyes were opened, and understanding much and guessing more she began to watch. The attitude of the Colonel also could be studied, and how he grew first suspicious, then sarcastic, and at last thoroughly alarmed, even to his ultimate evacuation of the Abbey House, detailed at length.

But to the chronicler of these doings and of their unusual issues at any rate, it appears best to resist a natural temptation; to deny the desire to paint such closing scenes in petto. Much more does this certainty hold of their explanation. Enough has been said to enable those in whom the spark of understanding may burn, to discover by its light how much is left unsaid. Enough has been hinted at to teach how much there

is still to guess. At least few will deny that some things are best abandoned to the imagination. To attempt to drag the last veil from the face of Truth in any of her thousand shapes is surely a folly predoomed to failure. From the beginning she has been a veiled divinity, and veiled, however thinly, she must and will remain. Also, even were it possible thus to rob her, would not her bared eyes frighten us?

It was late, very late, and there, pale and haggard in the low light of the fire, once again Morris stood pleading with the radiant image which his heart revealed.

"Oh, speak! speak!" he moaned aloud. "I weary of those pictures. They are too vast; they crush me. I grow weak. I have no strength left to fight against the power of this fearful life that is discovered. I cannot bear this calm everlasting life. It sucks out my mortality as mists are sucked up by the sun. Become human. Speak. Let me touch your hand. Or be angry. Only cease smiling that awful smile, and take those solemn eyes out of my heart. Oh, my darling, my darling! remember that I am still a man. In pity answer me before I die."

Then a low and awful cry, and Morris turned to behold Mary his wife. At last she had seen and heard, and read his naked heart. At last she knew

him--mad, and in his madness, most unfaithful--a man who loved one dead and dragged her down to earth for company.

Look! there in his charmed and secret sight stood the spirit, and there, over against her, the mortal woman, and he--wavering--he lost between the two.

Certainly he had been sick a long while, since the sun-ray touched the face of the old abbot carved in that corner of the room to support the hammer beam. This, as he had known from a child, only chanced at mid-summer. Mary was bending over him, but he was astonished to find that he could sit up and move. Surely, then, his mind must have been more ill than his body.

"Hush!" she said, "drink this, dear, and go to sleep."

It was a week after, and Morris had told her all, the kind and gentle wife who was so good to him, who understood and could even smile as he explained, in faltering, shame-heavy words. And he had sworn for her sake and his children's sake, that he would put away this awful traffic, and seek such fellowship no more.

Nor for six months did he seek it; not till the winter returned. Then, when his body was strong again, the ravening hunger of his soul overcame

him, and, lest he should go mad or die of longing, Morris broke his oath--as she was sure he would.

One night Mary missed her husband from her side, and creeping down in the grey of the morning, she found him sitting in his chair in the chapel workshop, smiling strangely, but cold and dead. Then her heart seemed to break, for she loved him. Yet, remembering her promises, and the dust whereof he was made, and the fate to which he had been appointed, she forgave him all.

The search renewed, or the fruit of some fresh discovery--what he sought or what he saw, who knows?--had killed him.

Or perhaps Stella had seemed to speak at last and the word he heard her say was Come!

This, then, is the end of the story of Stella Fregelius upon earth, and this the writing on a leaf torn from the book of three human destinies. Remember, only one leaf.