

Malahide and Forden

by Algernon Blackwood

I

Our three-months' tour was drawing to its close—the Company playing in a midland town at the moment and Forden was chatting with me in the wings during the second act, when Malahide's great voice boomed in my ears as he hurried to his entrance. It startled me; the audience must surely hear it too. Forden gave me his quick smile, an understanding wink added to it.

"Hubert, old man!" cried the voice. "There's a place called Barton I want to see—Barton-in-Fabis. Let's go tomorrow. There's a train at 10.15. Forden, you come too!" His eyes blazed at us with an odd glare through the grease-paint, his great shoulders swept round the canvas, and he was gone on to the stage, where at once his voice became audible in the lines that ten-weeks had made rather too familiar.

I experienced a twinge of surprise. Walking was little to Malahide's taste. He usually spent his spare time playing golf, and in the afternoon he invariably slept for a couple of hours, so as to be rested for the evening performance. That he should propose a whole day's walk, therefore, was unexpected.

My companion and I were left staring at each other.

"Does he mean it—d'you think!" I asked in a low voice. "It sounds such an odd name. You think it's real!" I laughed a little.

"A lovely name, though," came the whispered answer. "It's real enough. Yes—I've heard of it—"

"Oh, you've heard of it?" I interrupted, looking up at him.

He nodded. Always absent-minded rather, he was also always truthful. An expression on his face now puzzled me. He looked perturbed. I repeated my remark, anxious to press him for some reason.

"People make pilgrimages there—sometimes—I believe. There's an old church—" Then his cue sounded, and he moved quickly away, but flinging over his shoulder, again with his quick smile, a final whisper: "Oh, it's real, yes, quite real. We'll go."

So it was the church and the odd name that had caught Malahide's romantic fancy. Yet such a flat and

empty name, I thought, without the adjunct, which alone gave it atmosphere. "In fabis," I gathered from one of the local supers, meant "among the beans," and Barton was a village "with a lot of historic interest," he informed me proudly. The name and the historic interest, evidently, had taken Malahide's vagrant fancy. He was an incalculable fellow; but he was not a man to ply with questions. His temper was insecure as a wayward child's. I, therefore, asked no questions. Forden, too, was an elusive creature, where questions were concerned. There are people who instinctively detest having to give definite information in reply to definite questions. All the more, then, was I surprised to hear Forden ask one of Malahide—about the expedition. We passed the latter's dressing room as we left the theatre to walk home together, and the door was open.

"Ten-fifteen, remember, Central Station," boomed Malahide, catching sight of us. "Single tickets to Stanton. We walk from Stanton." It again surprised me; he had actually thought out details.

It was then that Forden asked his question:

"I—I suppose," he ventured, faltering a trifle, "there's a train back all right?"

The evening performance of course, involved an early meal, and the question seemed so natural that I thought nothing, but Malahide looked up from pulling on his big boots as though it startled him. He seemed taken by surprise. His eyes held the same blaze, the touch almost of glare, I had noticed before, but the startled air was added.

"We'll work round. What can it matter anyhow—provided we get there?" was all he vouchsafed, and in a tone that did not invite cross-examination.

So it was to be 10.15, with single tickets to Stanton, a walk thence to Barton among its Beans, with its old church and historic interest, and we were to "work round" to another station, and so home. Malahide had planned it all in advance. He wanted to go. Forden also wanted to go. It all seemed natural enough, ordinary, no exceptional feature anywhere about it beyond the trivial detail that Malahide did not care for walking as a rule. It is strange, therefore, that somewhere in my being lurked a firm conviction that the whole business was exceptional. For one thing, I felt sure that both Malahide and Forden did not really want to go. That they had to go, and meant to go, was the impression left upon my mind, not that either of them actually "wished" it.

During our supper of cold tongue, salad and beer, for instance, we made no further allusion to the expedition. Rather than actually avoided, it was just tacitly assumed, Forden, I partly gathered, realised that I still did not quite believe in the Barton walk, but was too delicately loyal to discuss our friend's delightful irresponsibilities. In his own mind, too, I fancied, lay the thought that Malahide would not turn up, and that he would lose his morning's sleep for nothing, but that he meant to keep the rendezvous none the less. My fancy may have been quite wrong, yet this, anyhow, was Forden all over. He was of finest material, something transparent and a trifle exquisite in him; and even when poorly cast—as in the present play—this quality shone beautifully through his acting.

We went soon to bed, but Malahide kept late hours, and Forden and myself were asleep long before he turned in. In the morning, however, he was waiting at the station when we got there. He had left the hotel before us. "I've been to look at the churches," was his unexpected explanation. "One of 'em was open, and I went in and sat a bit. A wonderful atmosphere of peace and stillness. By Jove, it makes one think," and he gabbled on about the charm and atmosphere of an empty, ancient church. It was surprising, of course, and it left us without comment. Yet I had known him before in this odd mood—when he was frightened about something, frightened usually, of death. Malahide, I understood, was frightened now, and his thoughts, for some reason, ran on death. In his eyes, moreover, I noticed, though veiled a little, a trifle deeper down, the same blaze I had seen the night before. And all the way to Stanton he gazed out of the window, humming to himself, the heap of morning papers beside him all untouched. The criticisms of his own performance, as, equally, mention of the Company, though of importance to the week's business, had, for once, no interest for him. His mind lay, evidently, upon other matters. He looked extraordinarily happy—happier, I thought, than I had ever seen him before; there was a careless indifference, a lightness, something, too, of a new refinement—to use a queer word his vehement personality did not ever suggest—thought were new, yet all this lit, as from below, by the gleam of hidden fear I most certainly detected in him. And it was these contradictions, I think, these incompatibilities almost, that affected me so powerfully. Impressions began to pour and pour upon me. Emotions stirred.

Things going on at a great speed in Malahide were things that I could not fathom.

To me, this short train journey to Stanton, *en route* for Barton among its Beans, already had the spice of something just a little unusual, of something a trifle forced. Unexpected touches played about it, as though a faint unknown light shone from the cloudless sky of that perfect April morning, but from *beyond* it. Forden, behind the transparent mask of his rather beautiful face, betrayed more than his customary absent-mindedness, sometimes to a point I could have thought bewilderment. Each time I spoke to him—to Malahide I did not once address a word—he started a little. In him there was no attempt at adjustment, no analysis, no effort to explain or query. He asked himself, I am sure, no single question. Whatever life brought him he accepted always. He was receptive merely; a recipient, but an extremely sensitive recipient, leaving all problems, all causes, to his God. Though without a formal creed, Forden was a deeply religious nature. And Forden now seemed to me—let me put it quite plainly as I felt it at the time—preparing, making himself ready, getting himself in hand, to meet something. Yes, to meet something—that is the phrase. And it was the search for this phrase, its discovery rather, that made me aware of an incomprehensible stress of subconscious excitement similarly in myself.

We were a queer enough trio, it may be, even in our normal moments. In myself, at any rate, being of different build to both Malahide and Forden, numerous little wheels were already whirring, gathering speed with every minute. This whirring one usually calls excitement. My own personal reactions to what followed are all, of course, that I can report. Though caught up, more or less, with the other two, I remained always the observer, thus sharing only a small portion probably of what my companions experienced. Another man, of different calibre, placed as I was, might have noticed nothing. I cannot say. My problem is to report faithfully what I observed; and whether another man would have observed the same thing, or nothing at all, is beside the mark. . . . Already before the train stopped at Stanton I felt—well, as if my feet did not quite touch the ground, and by the ground I mean the ordinary. It may, or may not, be an exaggeration to say that I felt both feet slightly off the earth. That my centre of gravity

was shifting is, perhaps, the most truthful expression I can find.

By the time we reached Stanton, at any rate, the whirring wheels had generated considerable heat, and with this heat playing all through my system I had already begun to see and feel in a way that was not quite the ordinary way. I perceived differently: I experienced, as it were, with a heightened consciousness. Perception seemed intensified a trifle; but more than that, and chiefly, it seemed different.

Different is the right adjective, I think. Malahide and Forden were “different” to the Malahide and Forden I knew comfortably from long acquaintance. Very, very slightly different, however, not radically so. I saw them from another angle. There was nothing I could seize or label. The instant my mind fastened on any detail, it was gone. The “difference” escaped me, leaving behind it a wonder of enquiry, a glow of curiosity I could not possibly define.

One sentence, perhaps, can explain my meaning, both in reference to the men and to the inanimate things they moved among: I saw *more* of everything. . . .

The fields, through the carriage windows, were of freshest green, yellow with a million buttercups, sparkling still from a shower that had followed sunrise, and the surface of the earth lay positively radiant in its spring loveliness. It laughed, it danced, it wept, it smiled. Yet it was not with this my mind was occupied during the half-hour’s run to Stanton, but rather with the being of my two companions. I made no effort to direct my thoughts. They flowed of their own accord, with poignant, affectionate emotions I could not explain, towards Malahide and Forden. . . .

II

Played about them, over them, these thoughts did, lovingly rather, and directed by a flair, so to say, of understanding that was new in me. . . .

Neither would ever see forty again, yet to me they seemed young, their careers still in front of them; and each, though without much energy, groping a way honestly toward some ultimate meaning in life that neither, I fancied, was ever likely to discover. If not dilettanti, both shrank from the big sacrifices. They were married, and each, in this fundamental relationship, unsatisfied, though each, outwardly at least, had mastered that dissatisfaction. Accepting, that is, a responsibility undertaken, they played the game. There was fine stuff in them. And both sought else-

where, though without much energy as I have said, an outlet marriage had accordingly failed to provide. Not immorality, of course; but a mental, maybe a spiritual, outlet. They sought it, I now abruptly judged, without success. Their stream of yearning, whatever its power, went lost among the stars and unremunerative dreams. The point, however, remains: this yearning did exist in each. Its power, I conceive, was cumulative.

Similarly, in their daily work as actors, and uncommonly good actors, one with a streak of fine inspiration, the other, Malahide, with a touch of fiery genius, both accepted an art that both held, mournfully, and secretly rather, was not creative. They were merely interpreters of other men’s creations. And, here again, lay deep dissatisfaction. Here, indeed, lay the root and essence of a searching pain both shared—since, God knows, they were gifted, honest beings—that a creative outlet, namely, was denied to creative powers.

This fundamental problem—the second one—lay unsolved in both; hence both were open to attack and ready for adventure. But the lesser adventures, refuge of commonplace fellows, they resolutely declined. Were they, perhaps, worthy then of the greater adventure that circumstances, at length, with inexplicable suddenness, and out of the least likely material, offered to them . . . ?

Somewhat thus, at any rate, I saw my companions, as the train jolted us that sparkling April morning, many years ago, towards Stanton, Malahide humming his mood idly through the open window, Forden lying at full length, reading the papers with listless eye. But I saw another thing as well, saw it with a limpid clearness my description may not hold: something ahead—an event—lay in waiting for them, something they knew about, both not desiring, yet desiring it, something inevitable as sunrise.

We move towards and past events successively, calling this motion time. But the event itself does not move at all. It is always there. We three, now sitting in the jolting carriage, were approaching an event about which they knew, but about which I did not know. I received, that is, an imperfect impression of something they saw perfectly. And in some way the accumulated power of their combined yearnings, wasted as I had thought, made what happened possible.

It was an extraordinary idea to come to me with such conviction, and with this atmosphere of

prophecy. I glanced at the two men, each like myself the victim, I remembered, of a strange, unhappy weakness. These weaknesses, too, I realised, contributed as well: un-balance, instability, were evidently necessary to the event. To steady, heroic types it never could have happened.

The train was stopping, and Malahide already had the door half-open. Forden, in his turn, sprang up.

“Stanton!” cried the former, as though he spoke a line of tense drama on the stage. “Here we are. Come on, you fellows!” And he was on the platform before the train drew to a standstill. His vehemence was absurd. He used it, I knew, to help him make the start, the fear I have mentioned prompting it. And Forden, like a flash, was on his heels. I followed, pausing a moment to collect the papers in case Malahide should ask for them, and then, thank heaven, as we stood on that ugly platform and asked the porter the way to Barton, my own strange feelings, heightened perception with them, dropped back with a jerk into the normal again. The uncomfortable insight was suddenly withdrawn. It had seemed an intrusion into their privacies; I was relieved to see them again as two friends merely, two actors, out for a country walk with me to a village called Barton-in-Fabis on a brilliant April morning.

One last flash only there was, as I followed them out, one final hint of what I have called “seeing more” of everything, seeing “differently,” rather. The three of us left the carriage as described, in sequence; yet to me it flashed with definite though illogical assurance that only one got out. Not that one was gone and two were left, but that the three of us got out as one, simultaneously. One being left that carriage. The fingers of a hand, thus, may move and point in several directions at once, while the hand, of which they form parts, moves forward in one direction only, as a whole. The simile occurred to me. . . . I perceived it, moreover, through what I can only call a veil of smoke.

III

“Oh, about three to four mile, maybe,” the porter was telling Malahide, “an’ you can pick up the Midland at Attenborough to get back. . . . Yes, it’s a nice day for a walk, I dessay. . . .”

The name made us laugh, but the instructions as to paths, stiles, signposts, turnings, I, personally, did not listen to. I assumed, as most do, an air of intelligent comprehension. Forden, I saw, wore a similar

expression, from which I knew that he, too, was not listening properly, but was leaving it to Malahide, wondering, like myself, how the latter could carry in his great slumbering mind so many intricate details whereas, actually, he was doing nothing of the sort. Malahide was merely acting, intent upon some other matter that was certainly not here and now.

We started off, therefore, with but a few details of our journey secure:—“a mile and a half down the road, and bearin’ to the right, you’ll see a signpost to Barton across the fields, and if you foller that a little way, bearin’ to the left a bit now, you’ll see a gate on the right just past some trees, but you don’t go through *that* gate, you go straight on, bearin’ to the right always, till you come to a farm, and then, through another gate. . . .”

There was a definite relation between the length of description and a tip in the porter’s mind, upon which Forden commented wittily, as we swung down the road, each relying upon the other two, and then exclaiming confidently, but with blurred minds, as we reached a signpost: “Ah! Here we are!” while we scrambled over a stile into enticing fields of gold.

We spoke little at first. “We must bear to the left, remember,” mentioned Malahide once, to which Forden and I nodded agreement, adding however: “till we reach the gate,” with Malahide’s firm reminder: “which we do *not* go through,” followed by my own contribution: “past some trees, yes, to another gate,”—and then Malahide’s conclusive summing up: “always bearing to the right, of course. . . .”

We jogged on happily, while the larks sang overhead, the cuckoos called and the brilliant sunshine flooded a countryside growing more and more remote from signs of men and houses. Not even a thatched cottage or a farm-house broke the loneliness from human kind. . . .

We spoke little, I have said; but my companions, presently, fell into a desultory conversation about their own profession, about present and future conditions on the stage, individual talent, rents of theatres, and so forth, to all of which, being an interloper merely, I listened with slight interest. It was the odd smell of burning, I think, that held my curious attention during this preliminary period, for I saw no cause for it, no smoke of rubbish being consumed, no heath-fire certainly. Malahide, I remember, coughed a little once or twice, and Forden sniffed like an animal that scents an untoward element in the atmosphere, though very faintly. They made no comment, I

offered none. It was, obviously, of no importance. The beauty of the day in its fresh spring brilliance absorbed me wholly, so that my thoughts ran on of their own accord, floating on a stream of happy emotion, careless as the pleasant wind. The sentences I caught from time to time did little more than punctuate, as it were, this stream of loveliness that poured through me from the April morning. Yet at intervals I caught their words, a phrase or a sentence would arrest me for a second; and each time this happened, I noticed what I can only call a certain curious change, a change—in distance. Their talk, I mean, passed gradually beyond me.

There was incoherence, due partly, of course, to the gaps I missed; and once or twice, it seemed to me, they were talking at cross-purposes, although tone and demeanour betrayed nothing of the sort. I remember that this puzzled me, that I registered the fact vaguely, at any rate; also, that an occasional comment of my own won no rejoinder from either Malahide or Forden—almost as though, momentarily, they had forgotten my existence and seemed unaware that I was with them.

Deeper and deeper into my own sensuous enjoyment of the day I sank accordingly, glad that I might take the beauty in my own little way. One thing only pierced my personal mood from time to time: the picture of Malahide's great head thrust forward a little when I glanced at him, the eyes turned upwards, carrying in them still that odd soft blaze, the glare, as I called it, now wholly gone; and that upon Forden's delicate face was a gentle expression, curiously rapt, yet with a faint brush as of bewilderment somewhere among the peering features. This impression, however, came back to me later, rather than held my attention much at the actual moment. We moved on deeper and deeper into the lonely country-side. With the exception of a man some fields ahead of us, I saw no living soul.

IV

Our path, meanwhile, crossed a lane, and a little later a road, though not a high-road since no telegraph poles marred it, and then Malahide remarked casually: "But, I say! It's about time, isn't it?" He stood still abruptly, staring round him. "It's about time—eh?"

"For what?" enquired Forden gently, not looking at him, a touch of resignation in his voice.

"That signpost, I mean. We should have come to it by now."

"Oh, that signpost," echoed the other, without interest.

Neither of them included me in this exchange, which had broken in upon a longish conversation, and I found myself resenting it. They had not so much as glanced in my direction.

"Signpost!" I exclaimed bluntly, looking straight at Malahide. "Why, we passed it long ago." And as I said it, my eye again took in the figure of the man three fields away, the only living being yet seen. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him merely, and a breath of sharper air, or something like it, passed quickly over my skin. "It said 'To Barton,'" I added, a flavour of challenge in my tone. I purposely kept my gaze hard on Malahide.

He turned slowly, with a look as though, casually, he picked me up again; our eyes met; that sharper air seemed in my mind now.

"We passed *a* signpost," he corrected me; "but it merely said 'Footpath.' And it pointed over there—behind us. The way we've come."

Forden, to my amazement, nodded in consent. "Over there, yes," he agreed, and pointed with his stick, but at right angles to the direction Malahide had meant. "And it said: '*From* Barton.'"

This confusion, produced purposely and in a spirit of play though of course it was, annoyed me. I disliked it, as though somewhere it reached a sad, uneasy region in my mind.

It was Malahide's turn to nod in consent. "Then we're all right," he affirmed with unnecessary vehemence in his deep voice. And that vehemence, again, I did not like. "Besides," he added sharply, pointing ahead, "there he is!"

A wave of vague emotion troubled me; for an instant I felt again that sharper air—and this time in the heart.

"Who?" I asked quickly.

He replied carelessly: "The man."

"*What* man?"

Malahide turned his eyes full upon my own, so that their soft blaze came over me like sunshine, almost with a sense of warmth in them. On his great face lay a singular expression. I heard Forden, who stood just behind me, laughing gently. There seemed a drift of smoke about them both. I knew a touch of goose-flesh.

“What man do you mean?” I asked with louder emphasis, and this time, I admit, with a note of exasperation that would not be denied, for the nonsense, I thought, had gone far enough, and there was a flavour in it that set my nerves on edge.

Malahide’s reply came easily and naturally: “The man who plants them,” he said without a smile. “He sticks them into the ground, that fellow. He’s going about with an assortment of signposts ‘To and From Barton,’ and every now and again he plants one for us.”

“We’re standing under one now,” Forden breathed behind me in his purring way, and looking up I saw that this was true. I read in black lettering upon a white background: “To Barton.” It indicated the direction we were taking.

It occurred to me suddenly now that we had already walked at least four miles, yet had seen no farm, no trees, no garden. I had been sunk too deep in my own mood to notice things perhaps. This signpost I certainly had not noticed until Forden drew my attention to it. Malahide was tapping the wooden arm with the point of his stick, reading the lettering aloud as he did so:

“Footpath *From* Barton,” I heard him boom. And instantly my eyes fixed tightly on it with all the concentration that was in me. Yes, Malahide had read correctly. Only, the arm now swung the other way. It pointed behind us! And I burst out laughing. Sight and memory had, indeed, fumbled badly. I felt myself for a moment “all turned round,” as the saying is. Malahide laughed too; we all laughed together. It was boisterous, not quite spontaneous laughter, but at any rate it relieved a sense of intolerable tension that in myself had reached a climax. This fooling had been overdone, I felt.

“So, you see, we *are* all right,” Malahide exclaimed, and swung forward over the meadow, already plunged again in the conversation with Forden which he himself had interrupted. They had enjoyed their little game about the signposts, Malahide, in particular, his touch of fancy about “the man who planted them.” It all belonged to the careless, happy mood of a holiday expedition, as it were—the nonsense of high spirits. This, at least, was the ready explanation my mind produced so glibly, knowing full well it would not pass the censor of another kind of understanding, a deeper kind, that sought hurriedly, even passionately, for the true

explanation. It was *not* nonsense; nor was it acceptable. It alarmed me.

I repeat: this confusion about directions, the two men agreeing that opposite directions were one and the same, was not the nonsense that it sounds; and I affirm this in view of that heightened perception, already first experienced in the train, which now came back upon me in a sudden flood. It brought with it an atmosphere of prophecy, almost of prevision, and certainly of premonition, an atmosphere that accompanied me, more or less, with haunting persistence to the end.

And its first effect was singular: all that a man says, I now became aware, has three meanings, and not merely one. The revelation arrived as clearly as though it were whispered to me through the shining air. There is the literal meaning of the actual words; there is the meaning of the sentence itself; and there is the meaning, above and beyond both these, in which the whole of the utterer is concerned, a meaning, that is, which the unconscious secret part in him—the greater part—tries and hopes to say. This last, the most significant of all three, since it includes cause as well as result, makes of every common sentence a legend and a parable. Gesture, tone of voice betray its trend; what is omitted, or between the lines, betrays still more. Its full meaning, being in relation to unknown categories, is usually hidden both from utterer and hearers. It deals simultaneously with the past, the present and—the future. I now became aware of this Third Meaning in the most commonplace remarks of my companions.

It was an astounding order of perception to occur to me, and the difficulty of reporting it must be obvious from this confused description. Yet it seemed to me at the time so simple, so convincing, that I did not even question its accuracy and truth. Malahide and Forden, fooling together about the contradictory signposts, had betrayed this third meaning in all they said and did. Indeed, that it appeared impossible, absurd, was a proof, perhaps the only possible proof, of its reality. Momentarily, as it were, they had become free of unknown categories.

V

My own attitude contained at first both criticism and resistance; it was only gradually that I found myself caught in the full tide that, apparently, swept my companions along so easily. A first eddy of it had touched me in the train, when my feet felt a little “off

the earth"; now I was already in the bigger current; before long I had become entirely submerged with them Fields and lanes, meanwhile, slipped rapidly behind us, but no farm, no trees, no gate, as the porter described, had been seen. We were lost, it seemed, in the heart of the sparkling April day; dew, light and gentle airs our only guides. The day contained us.

I made efforts to disentangle myself.

"Barton's not getting any nearer," I expostulated once.

"Barton-in-Fabis," mentioned Malahide with complete assurance, that no longer held a trace of vehemence, "is there—where it always is," while Forden's breath of delicate laughter followed the flat statement, as though the larks overhead had sung close beside my ear.

"D'you think we're going right?" I ventured another time. "Our direction, I mean?"

Again, with that ghostly laughter, Forden met me: "It's the way we have to go," he replied half under his breath. "It's always a mistake to trouble *too much* about direction—actual direction, that is." And Malahide was singing to himself as though nothing mattered in the world, details as to direction least of all. . . . It was just after this, I remember, as our lane came to a stile and we leaned over it comfortably, all three, that the odour of burning touched my mind again, only with it, at the same time, a sight so moving, that I paused in thought, catching my breath a little. For the field before us sloped down into the distance, ancient furrows showing just beneath the surface like the flowing folds of a shaken carpet. They ran, it seemed, like streams. Their curve downhill lent this impression of movement. They were of gold. Every inch of the surface was smothered with the shimmering cream of a million yellow buttercups.

"Rivers of Gold!" I exclaimed involuntarily, and at the same moment Forden was over the stile in a single leap and running across the brilliant grass.

"Look out!" he cried, a bewitched expression on his face, "it's fire!"—and he was gone.

It was as though he swam to the neck in gleaming gold. He peered back at me a second through the shining flood—and it was in this instant, just as I caught his turning face, that Malahide was after him. He passed me like a wave, still singing; there was a rush of power in his speed. I followed at once, unable to resist. The three of us ran like one man over and through that flood of golden buttercups, passing, as

we did so, every sign the railway porter had told us to look out for: the farm, the trees, the gate, the second gate—everything. Only, we passed them more than once. It was as though we swung in a rapid circle round and round the promised signs, always passing them, always coming up to them, always leaving them behind, then always seeing them in front of us again, yet the entire sequence right, natural and—possible.

Now, I noticed this. I was aware of this. Yet it caused me no surprise. That it should be so seemed quite ordinary—at the time. . . .

We brought up presently, not even breathless, some half-way down that golden field.

"Nothing to what I expected," exclaimed Malahide, interrupting his singing for the first time.

"There was no pain," mentioned Forden, his voice soft and comforting, as though he spoke to a little child.

There was an instant of most poignant emotion in me as they said it; a certainty flashed through me that I could not seize; a sudden wave, as it were, of tears, of joy, of sorrow, of despair, swept past me and was gone again before I had the faintest chance to snatch at any explanation. Like the memory of some tremendous, rather awful dream, it vanished, and Malahide's quick remark, the next second, capped its complete oblivion:

"And there *he* goes again!" I heard. "He's stuck another one in!"

He was pointing to a hedge at the bottom of the field where, behind the veil of its creamy hawthorn, I just made out the figure of a man ambling slowly along, till the hedge, growing thicker, finally concealed him. But the signpost, when we reached it a few minutes later, showed an arm rotten with age, and only the faded legend on it, hardly legible: "Footpath." It pointed downwards—into the ground.

VI

We swung forward again, without a moment's delay, it seemed, my companions talking busily together as before, their meaning, also as before, far, far beyond me. They were talking, too, on several subjects at once. The odd language they had just used, the way we swung forward instantly, without comment or explanation, touched no sense of queer-ness in me—then. No comment or explanation were necessary; it was natural we should go straight on.

Their talking on “several subjects simultaneously,” however, did occur to me—yes, as marvellous.

Foolish, even impossible, as it must sound, it yet did happen; they talked on more than one subject at the same time. They carried on at least a couple of conversations at once without the slightest difficulty, without the smallest effort or confusion. My own admission into the secret was partial, I think; hence my trouble and perplexity. To them it was easy and natural. With me, even the strain of listening made the head swim. The effort to follow them was certainly a physical one, for I was aware of a definite physical reaction more than once, almost indeed of a kind of dizziness akin to nausea.

To report it is beyond my power. For one thing, I cannot remember, for another, the concentration necessary left me a little stupefied. I can give an instance only, and that a poor one. They used “third meanings,” too.

Malahide, thus, while voluble enough in his normal state, was at the same time usually inarticulate. His verbosity, that is, conveyed little. The tiny vital meaning in him fumbled and stammered through countless wrappings, as it were. These wrappings smothered it. Now, on the contrary, he talked fluently and clearly. It was I who was puzzled—at first—to find the subject he discussed so glibly. And Forden, usually timid and hesitating in his speech, though never inarticulate, now also used a flow of fearless words in answer. Yet not precisely “in answer,” for both men talked at once. They uttered simultaneously—on two subjects, if not on three:

“We all deserve, maybe,” Malahide’s deep voice thundered, “a divine attention few of us receive—God’s pity. We are not, alas, whole-hearted. Few of us, similarly, deserve another compliment. Due to splendour—the Devil’s admiration.”

His voice, for once, was entirely natural, unself-conscious. There was the stress of real feeling and belief in what he said.

“I for one,” he went on, “I take my hat off to the whole-hearted, whether in so-called good or evil. For of such stuff are eventual angels wrought . . .”

Angels! The word caught me on the raw. Its “third meaning” “caught me on the raw, that is, and with a sense of power and beauty so startling that I missed the rest. The word poured through me like a flame. Of what he spoke, to what context the strange statement was related, I had no inkling; yet, while he actually spoke the words, I heard Forden speaking to

Malahide, who heard and understood and answered—but speaking, and simultaneously, on another matter altogether. And this other matter, it so chanced, I grasped. Remote enough from what Malahide was saying, and trivial by comparison, it referred to an Alpine sojourn with his wife a couple of summers before. Malahide, too, had been with them:

“Often, after the hotel dinner,” Forden said contemptuously, “I heard them mouthing all sorts of lovely poetic phrases; yet not one of them would make the slight sacrifice of personal comfort necessary to experience that loveliness, that poetry, in themselves . . .”

To which Malahide, though still developing “God’s pity” and the “Devil’s admiration” in phrases packed with real feeling, contrived somehow to answer, but always simultaneously, his friend’s remark:

“They bring their own lower world,” he boomed, “even into the beauty of the mountains, then wonder that the beauty of the mountains tells them nothing. They would find Balham on great Betelgeuse”—a tremendous laugh rang out—“and Clapham Junction on fiery Vega!”

“*Her* pity,” came Forden’s words, talking of another matter altogether, yet uttered simultaneously with his friend’s laughing rhetoric, “is self-pity merely. She does these out-of-the-way things, you see, without sufficient apparent reason. It is not a desire for notoriety—that would shock her—but it is a desire to be conspicuous. Life, which means people, did not make a fuss about her in her youth. But the law of compensation works inevitably. Late in life, you see, she means to have that fuss.”

It is the phraseology, perhaps, that enables me to remember this singular exchange. My head, of course, was spinning. For Malahide made a reply to this, while still discussing the poseurs in the Alpine hotel. And while they talked thus on two subjects simultaneously, Forden managed to chat easily too *with me*—upon a third . . . It was as though a second dimension in time had opened for them. Between myself and Forden, again, there was plainly some kind of telepathic communication. He had my thought, at any rate, before I uttered it aloud.

Of this I can give two instances, both trivial, yet showing that simultaneously with his Malahide-conversations he was paying attention to my own remarks, and—simultaneously again—was answering them. It was absolutely staggering.

Here are the instances memory retained:

Some scraps of white paper, remnants of an untidy picnic party, lay fluttering in the thick grass some distance in front of us, and at the first glance I thought they were not paper, but—chickens. Only on coming nearer was the mistake clear. Whether I meant to comment aloud on the little deception, or not, I cannot remember; but in any case, before I actually did so, Forden, glancing down at me with his gentle smile, observed: "I, too, thought at first they were chickens." He hit them idly with his stick as we passed.

The second instance, equally trivial, equally striking at the same time, was the gamekeeper's cottage on the fringe of a wood. It suggested to my mind, for some reason, a charcoal-burner's hut in a book of German fairy-tales, and I said so. This time I spoke my thought. "But, you know, I've just said that," came Forden's comment, his eyes twinkling brightly as before. And it was true; he had said it a fraction of a second before I did. During this brief exchange between us, moreover, he was still talking fluently with Malahide—on at least two subjects—and simultaneously. . . . Now, from the fact that I noticed this, that my mind made a note of it, that is, I draw the conclusion that my attention was definitely arrested, surprise accompanying it. The extraordinariness of the matter struck me, whereas to my companions it was ordinary and natural. I was, therefore, not wholly included in their marvellous experience. I was still the observer merely. . . .

Immediately following the telepathic instances with Forden, then, came a flash of sudden understanding, as though I were abruptly carried a stage deeper into their own condition:

I discerned one of the subjects they discussed so earnestly together.

This came hard upon a momentary doubt—the doubt that they were playing, half-fooling me, as it were. Then came the swift flash that negated the doubt. I can only compare it to the amazing review of a man's whole life that is said to flash out in a moment of extreme danger. This quality, as of juggling with Time, belonged to it.

Malahide and Forden, then, I realised, were talking together of Woman, of women, rather, but of individual women. Ah! The flash grew brighter: of their own wives. Yet that Malahide spoke of Forden's wife and that: Forden discussed Mrs. Malahide. Each had the free *entrée* into the other's mind, and what

each was too loyal to say about his own wife, the other easily said for him. This swiftest telepathic communication, as with myself and Forden, they enjoyed between themselves. With supreme ease it was accomplished.

It was an astounding performance. This discussion of their wives was actually, of course, a discussion of—well, not of Mary Forden and Jane Malahide individually, but, through them, of the deep unsolved problem of mate and sex which each man had faced in his own life—unsuccessfully. The fragments I caught seemed meaningless, because the full context was lacking for me. I got a glimmer of their Third Meanings, however, and realised one thing, at any rate, clearly: they were giving one another help. Forden's honeymoon, I remembered, had been spent in the Alps, whereas Malahide's wife had the lack of proportion which made her conspicuous by a pose of startling originality. This gave me a clue. Time, however, as a sequence of minutes, days and years, did not trouble either speaker. The *entire* matter, regardless of past and present, seemed spread out like a contour-map beneath the eyes of their inner understanding. There was no picking out one characteristic, dealing with it, then passing on to consider another. To *me* it came, seriatim, in that fashion, but *they* saw the matter whole and all at once; so rapidly, so comprehensively, too, that the sentences flew upon each other's heels as though uttered simultaneously by each speaker.

They were it seemed, poised above the landscape of their daily lives, and in such a way that they were able to realise present, past and future simultaneously. It was no longer exactly "to-day," it was no longer necessarily "to-day." Temporarily they had escaped from the iron tyranny of being fastened to a particular hour on a particular day. They—and partially myself with them—were no longer chained by the cramping discipline of a precise moment in time, any more than a prisoner, his chains filed off, is fixed to a precise spot in his dungeon. *Where* we were in time, God knows. It might have been yesterday, it might have been to-morrow—any yesterday, any tomorrow—which we now realised simultaneously with the so-called present. It happened to be—so I felt—a particular to-morrow we realised, and it was something in the three of us (due, I mean, to the combination of our three personalities) that determined which particular to-morrow it was. The prisoner in space, his chains filed off, moves instinctively

to the window of escape; and they, prisoners in time, moved now similarly to a window—of escape. . . .

A flash of this escape from ordinary categories, of this “different” experience, had come to me as we left the railway carriage. It now grew brighter, more steady, more continuous. I seemed travelling in time, as one travels ordinarily in space. To the wingless creature crawling over fields the hedge behind it is past, the hedge beyond it future. It cannot conceive both hedges existing simultaneously. Then some miracle gives it wings. Hanging in the air, it sees both past and future existing simultaneously. Losing its wings once more, it crawls across the fields again. That air-experience now seems absurd, impossible, contradicting all established law. The same signpost points now as it always pointed—in one direction.

This analogy, though imperfect, occurred to me, while we brought up, but not even breathlessly, half-way down the field as already mentioned, and all I have attempted to describe took place in that brief interval of running.

Before entering that field with its rivers of gold, we had been leaning on a stile; we were leaning on that stile still. Or, it may be put otherwise: we were leaning on that stile again.

Similarly, the whole business of running, of passing the signs mentioned by the porter, the conversations, the emotions, everything in fact, were just about to happen all over again. More truly expressed, they were all happening still. Like Barton, in Malahide’s previous phrase, it was all *there*. The hedge behind, the hedge in front, were both beneath us, existing simultaneously. . . . At a particular spot in the hedge—a particular “to-morrow”—we paused . . .

VII

. . . At my side, touching my shoulders, Malahide and Forden were quietly discussing the way to Barton-in-Fabis, and, as I listened, there came over me again that touch of nausea. For, while flatly contradicting one another, they were yet in complete agreement.

It was at this instant the shock fell upon me with its glory and its terror.

My companions stood back to back. I was a yard or so to one side. They both now turned suddenly—but how phrase the incredible thing?—they both came at me, while at the same time they went away from me. A hand, endowed with consciousness, a

hand being turned inside out like a glove, might feel what I felt.

I saw their two faces. A little more, a little less, and there must have been a bristling horror in the experience. As it was, I felt only that a sheet of wonder caught us up all three. The odour of burning that came with it did not terrify; that drift of yellow smoke, now deepening, did not wound. I accepted, I understood, there was even some thing in me had rejoiced.

In the twinkling of an eye, both men were marvellously changed: they stood before me, splendid and divine. I was aware of the complete being in each, the full, whole Self, I mean, instead of the minute fraction I had known hitherto. All that lay in them, either of strength or weakness, was magnificently fused. . . . The word “glory” flashed, followed immediately by a better word, and one that Malahide had already used. Its inadequacy was painful. Its third meaning, however, in that instant blazed. “Angels” in spite of everything, remains.

And I, too, moved—moved with them both, but in a way, and in a direction, I had never known before. The glove, the hand, being turned inside out, is what my pen writes down, but accurate description is not possible. I moved, at any rate, on—*on* with my two companions towards Barton.

“It’s all one to me,” I said, perfectly aware that I suddenly used the third meaning of the phrase, and that Malahide and Forden understood.

“I’ve just said that myself,” the latter mentioned—and this again was true. The smile, the happiness, on his face carried the very spirit of that radiant April morning, the essence of spring, with its birds, its flowers, its dew, its careless wisdom.

“Such things,” cried Malahide, “are painless after all. It comes on me like sleep upon a child. Ha, ha!” he laughed, in his wild, vehement way. “It’s all one to me now too. Escape, by God!”

The stab of fierce emotion his language caused me passed and vanished; the afflicting memory of the burning odour was forgotten too. Everything, indeed, was one. Both men, I realised, gazed at me, smiling, wonderful, superb, and in their eyes a light, whose reflection apparently lay also in my own; an immense and awful pity that our everyday, unhappy, partial selves should ever have dared to masquerade as though they were complete and real. . . .

“God’s pity,” sang Malahide like a trumpet. “We shall have deserved it. . . .!”

"And the Devil's admiration," followed Forden's sweeter tones, as of a *vox humana*, both. Distant, yet like a lark against my ears. He was laughing with sheer music. "There was no terror. I knew it must be so. . . . Oh, the delicious liberty . . . at last!"

Both uttered simultaneously. In the same breath, anguish and happiness working together, my own voice cried aloud:

"We are, for once, whole-hearted!"

VIII

At the moment of actual experience a new category would not seem foolish or impossible. These qualities would declare themselves only when it passed away. This was what happened—gradually—to me now, and, alas, to my companions too. A searing pain accompanied the transition, but no shock of violence.

At the pinnacle there was a state of consciousness too strange, too "different," to be set down. The content of life, its liberty, its splendour, its characteristics of grandeur, even of divinity, were more than ordinary memory could retain. My own cry: "We are whole-hearted" must betray how pitiful description is. . . . Thus, the lovely moment, for instance, when I first saw rivers of gold, kept repeating itself—because it gave me happiness, because it moved me. That field of golden buttercups was always—there. I lingered with it, came back to it, enjoyed it over and over again, yet with no sense of repetition. It was new and fresh each time. Now, Malahide and Forden, selecting other moments, chose these instead, and these, again, were moments easy to be remembered. Their finer instances baffie memory, although I knew and shared them at the time. Forden, for some peculiar choice to himself, was in the mountains which he loved; his honeymoon presumably. Malahide, on the other hand, preferred his stars, though details of this have left me beyond recovery. . . . Yet, while we lingered, respectively, among rivers of gold and stars and snowy peaks, we were solidly side by side in the actual present, crossing the country fields towards Barton-in-Fabis on this April morning.

The gradual passing of this state remains fairly clear in me.

There came signs, I remember, of distress and effort in our relationships. This, at least, was the first touch of sorrow that I noticed. I was coming back to the surface, as it were. The change was more in

myself than in the others. There was argument about footpath, signposts, and the way to Barton generally.

"The fellow has planted his last post," I heard Malahide complaining. "Now he'll begin pulling them all up again. He both wants us to get to Barton, yet doesn't want it." He paused. His usual laugh did not follow. "You know," he went on, his whisper choking a little oddly in his throat, "he rather—puts the wind up me." A spasm ran over his big body. Then suddenly, he added, half to himself, with an effort painfully like a gasp, "I can't get my breath—quite."

Forden spoke very quickly in his delicate way, resignation rather sweetly mingled in it: "Well, at any rate, we're all right so far, for I see the porter's farm and gate at last." He started and pointed. "Over there, you see." Only, instead of pointing across the fields, he—to my sharp dismay—looked and pointed straight into the sky above him.

It was the fear in Malahide that chiefly afflicted me. And the pain of this, I remember, caused me to make an effort—which was an unwise thing to do. I drew attention to the ordinary things about us:

"Look, there's a hill," I cried.

"God!" exclaimed Forden, with quiet admiration, "what amazing things you say!" While Malahide began to sing again with happiness.

His reaction to my sentence forced me to realise the increasing change in myself. As I uttered the words I knew their third meaning; in the plain sentences was something that equalled in value: "See! the Heavens are open. There is God!" My companions still heard this third meaning, for I saw the look of majesty in Malahide's great eyes, the love and beauty upon Forden's shining face. But, for myself, having spoken, there remained—suddenly—nothing more than a commonplace low hill upon the near horizon. The gate and farm I saw as well. A feeling of tears rose in me, for the straining effort for recovery was without result, anguished and bitter beyond words.

I stole a glance at my companions. And that strange word Malahide had used came back to me, but with a deep, an awful sense of intolerable regret, as though its third meaning were gone beyond recall, and only two rather empty and foolish syllables remained. . . .

It was passing, yes, for all three of us now; the gates of ivory were closing; there was confusion, and a rather crude foolishness. Oddly enough, it was Forden—seeing that he was altogether a slighter fellow than Malahide—it was Forden who rose most

slowly to the surface. Very gradually indeed he left the deeps we had all known together. To all that he now said and did Malahide responded with an aggravating giggle. He said such foolish things, confused, uncomfortable to listen to. His nerves showed signs of being frayed. He became a trifle sullen, a little frightened as well, and in his gait and gesture lay a disconcerting hurry and uncertainty, as though, hesitating to make a decision of some vital sort, he was flurried, almost in a frenzy sometimes, trying vainly to escape. This stupid confusion in him afflicted me, but the effort to escape seemed to paralyse something in my mind. It was petrifying And thus the sequence of what followed, proved extraordinarily difficult to remember afterwards. An atmosphere of sadness, of foreboding, of premonition came over me; there was desolation in my heart; there were stabs of horrible presentiment. All these, moreover, were ever vaguely related to one thing—that inexplicable faint odour of burning

What memory recalls can be told very briefly. It lies in my mind thus, condensed and swift:

The storm was natural enough, but, here again, the smell of burning alarmed and wrung me. It was faint, it was fugitive. Our mistake about the river had no importance, for the depression in the landscape might easily after all have held flowing water. The roofs, too, were not the roofs of Barton, but of a hamlet nestling among orchards, Clifden by name, and it was here, Forden informed us, he had first met his wife and had proposed to her; this also of no importance, except that he went on talking about it, and that it surprised him. He suddenly recognised the place, I mean. It increased his bewilderment, and is mentioned for that reason.

The storm, then, came abruptly. We had not seen it coming. Following a low line of hills, it overtook us from behind, bringing its own wind with it. The rustling of the leaves was the first thing I noticed. The trees about us began to shake and bend. The sparkling brilliance, I saw, had left the day; the sun shone dully; the fields were no longer radiant; the flowers, too, were gone, for we were crossing a ploughed field at the moment.

The discussion between us may be omitted; its confusion is really beyond me to describe. The storm, however, is easily described, for everyone has seen that curious thickening of the air on a day in high summer, when the clouds are not really clouds, but come as a shapeless, murky gloom, threatening a por-

tentous downpour, while yet no single raindrop falls. In childhood we called it “blight,” believing it to be composed of myriads of tiny insects. Lurid effects of lighting accompanied it, trees and roofs, against its dark background, looking as if stage flares illumined them. The whole picture, indeed, was theatrical in the extreme, artificial almost; but the aspect that I, personally, found so unwelcome, was that it laid over the sky an appearance of volumes of dense, heavy smoke. The idea of burning may, or may not, have been in my own mind only, for my companions made no comment on it. I cannot say. That it made my heart sink I remember clearly.

It was a sham storm, it had no meaning, nothing happened. Having accomplished its spectacular effect, it passed along the hills and dissipated, and the sun shone out with all its former brilliance. Yet, before it passed, certain things occurred; they came and went, it seemed to me afterwards, with the simultaneity of dream happenings. Forden, noticing the wall of gloom advancing, catching the noise of the trees as well, stopped dead in his tracks, and stared. He sniffed the air, but made no comment. An expression of utter bewilderment draped his face. He seemed once more bewitched. It was here the smell of burning came to me most strongly.

“Look out!” he cried, and started to run. He ran in front of us, we did not attempt to follow. But he ran in a circle, like a terrified animal. His figure went shifting quickly, silhouetted, like the trees and roofs, against the murky background of the low-hanging storm. A moment later he was beside us again, his face white, his eyes shining, his breath half-gone.

“Come on, old Fordy,” said Malahide affectionately, taking him by the arm. He, for some reason, was not affected. “It’s not going to rain, you know, and anyhow there’s no good running. Let’s sit down and eat our lunch.” And he led the way across a few furrows to the hedge.

We ate our sandwiches and cake and apples. The sun shone hotly again. None of us smoked, I remember. For myself, the smell of burning had left something so miserable in me that I dared not smell even a lighted match. But no word was said by anybody in this, or in any other, sense. I kept my own counsel. . . . And it was while we lay resting idly, hardly speaking at all, that a sound reached me from the other side of the hedge: a footstep in the flowered grass. My companions exchanged quick glances, I

noticed, but I did not even turn my head. I did not dare.

"He's putting it in," whispered Malahide, a touch of the old vehemence in his eyes. "The last one!" For den smiled, nodded his head, and was about to add some comment of his own, when the other interrupted brusquely:

"Is that the way to Barton?" he enquired suddenly in a louder voice, something challenging, almost truculent, in the tone. He jerked his head towards the gate we had recently come through. "Through that gate and past that farm, I mean?"

The answering voice startled me. It was the owner of the footsteps, of course, behind the hedge.

"No. That's a dead end," came in gruff but not unpleasant country tones.

There was no more than that. It was all natural enough. Yet a lump came up in my throat as I heard. I still dared not look round over my shoulder. I looked instead into For den's face, so close beside me. "We're all right," he was saying, as he glanced up a little. "Don't struggle so. It's the way we've got to go . . ." and was about to say more, when a fit of coughing caught him, as though for a moment he were about to suffocate. I hid my eyes quickly; a feeling of horror and despair swept through me; for there was terror in the sound he made; but the next second, when I looked again, the coughing had passed, and I saw in his face an expression of radiant happiness; the eyes shone wonderfully, there was a delicate, almost unearthly, beauty on his features. I found myself trembling, utterly unnerved.

"We'd better be getting on," mentioned Malahide, in his abrupt, inconsequent fashion. "We mustn't miss that train back." And it was this unexpected change of key that enabled me at last to turn my head. I looked hurriedly behind the hedge. I was just in time to see a man, a farmer apparently, in the act of planting a post into the ground. He was pressing it down, at any rate, and much in the fashion of Malahide's former play about a "fellow who planted signposts." But he was planting—two. Side by side they already stood in the earth. One arm pointed right, the other left. They formed, thus, a cross.

The very same second, with a quiver in the air, as when two cinema pictures flash on each other's heels with extreme rapidity, I experienced an optical delusion. I must call it such, at any rate. The focus of my sight changed instantaneously. The man was already in the distance, diminished in outline, moving away

across the bright fields of golden buttercups. I saw him as I had seen him once or twice before, earlier in the day, a moving figure in the grass; and when my eyes shifted back to examine the posts, there was but a single post—a signpost whose one arm bore in faded lettering the words: "*From Barton.*" It pointed in the direction whence we had come. . . .

I followed my companions in a dream that is better left untouched by words. Led by Malahide, we passed through Clifden; we came to the Trent and were ferried across; and a little later we reached, as the porter had described, a Midland station called Attenborough. A train soon took us back to the town where we were playing. Malahide, without a word, vanished from our side the moment we left the carriage. I did not see him again until, dressed in his lordly costume, he stood in the wings that night, waiting impatiently for his entrance. I had walked home with For den, flung myself on the bed, and dropped off into a deep two-hours' sleep.

IX

A performance behind the scenes that night was more dramatic—to me, at least—than anything the enthusiastic audience witnessed from the front. The three of us met in the wings for the first time since Malahide had given us the slip at the station. High tea at six I had alone, For den for some reason going to a shop for his meal. Malahide, for another reason, ate nothing. We met, anyhow, at our respective posts in the wings. Neither For den nor I were on till late in the second act, and as we came down the rickety stairs from separate dressing-rooms, at the same moment it so chanced, I realised at once that he was as little inclined to talk as I was. My own mind was still too packed with the whirling wonder of the whole affair for utterance. We nodded, then dropped back towards the door through which he would presently make his entrance.

It was just then, while someone was whispering "He's giving a marvellous performance to-night," that Malahide swept by me from his exit and ran to his dressing-room for a hurried change.

"Hullo, Hubert!" he cried in his tempestuous way. "I say . . ." as though it surprised him to see me there. "By the by," he rattled on, stopping dead for a breathless second in the rush to his room, "there's a place called Barton I want to see—Barton-in-Fabis. Let's go tomorrow. There's a train at 10.15. For den can come too!" And he was gone. Gone too, I realised with a

dreadful sinking of the heart, a trembling of the nerves as well—utterly gone as though it had never happened, was all memory of the day's adventure. The mind in Malahide was blank as a clean-washed slate.

And Forden—standing close behind him within easy earshot—my eye fell upon Forden, who had heard every single word. I saw him stare and bite his lips. He passed a hand aimlessly across his forehead. His eyelids flickered. There was a quiver of the lips. In his old man's wig and make-up, he looked neither himself nor the part he was just about to play. Waiting there for his cue, now imminent, he stared fixedly at Malahide's vanishing figure, then at me, then blankly into space. He was like a man about to fall. He looked bewitched again. A moment's intense strain shot across the delicate features. He made in that instant, I am convinced, a tremendous, a violent, effort to recapture something that evaded him, an effort that failed completely. The next second, too swift to be measurable, that amazing expression, the angel's, shone out amazingly. It flashed and vanished. . . . His cue sounded. He, too, was gone.

How I made my own entrance, I hardly know. Five minutes later we met on the stage. He was normal. He was acting beautifully. His mind, like Malahide's, was a clean-washed slate.

X

My one object was to avoid speech with either Malahide or Forden. The former was on the stage until the end of the play, but the latter made no appearance in the last act. I slipped out the moment I was free to go. Malahide's door was ajar, but he did not see me. Foregoing supper, I was safely in bed when I heard Forden come upstairs soon after midnight. I fell into an uneasy sleep that must have been deeper, however, than it seemed, for I did not hear Malahide come in, but I was wide awake on the instant, dread clutching me with gripping force, when I heard Forden's voice outside my door.

"It's half-past nine!" he warned me. "We mustn't miss the train, remember!"

After gulping down some coffee, I went with him to the station, and he was normal and collected as you please. We chatted in our usual fashion. Clearly, his mind held no new, strange thing of any sort. Malahide was there before us . . .

The day, for me, was a nightmare of appalling order. A kind of mystical horror held me in a vice.

Half-memories of bewildering and incredible things haunted me. The odour of burning, faint but unmistakable, was never absent . . .

We took single tickets to Stanton, Malahide reading a pile of papers and commenting volubly on the criticisms of the play. A porter at the station gave us confused directions. We followed faulty signposts, ancient and illegible, losing ourselves rather stupidly . . . and I noticed a man—a farmer with a spud—wandering about the fields and making thrusts from time to time at thistles. A sham storm followed a low line of hills, but no rain fell, and the brilliance of the April day was otherwise unspoilt. Barton itself we never reached, but we crossed the Trent on our way to a station called Attenborough, first passing a hamlet, Clifden, where, Forden informed us, he had met the girl he later made his wife.

It was a dull and uninspired expedition, Malahide voluble without being articulate, Forden rather silent on the whole. . . . and at the home station Malahide gave us the slip without a word . . . but during the entire outing neither one nor other betrayed the slightest hint of familiarity with anything they had known before. In myself the memory lay mercilessly sharp and clear. I noted each startling contrast between the one and other. At the end I was worn out, bone-tired, every nerve seemed naked . . . and, again, I left the theatre alone, ran home, and went supperless to bed.

My determination was to keep awake at all costs, but sleep caught me too easily, as I believed it was meant to catch me. No such little thing as a warning was allowed to override what had to be, what had already been. . . . In the early hours of the morning, about two o'clock, to be exact, I woke from a nightmare of overwhelming vividness. Wide awake I was, the instant I opened my eyes. The nightmare was one of suffocation. I was being suffocated, and I carried over into waking consciousness the smell of burning and the atmosphere of smoke. The room, I saw at once, *was* full of smoke, the burning was not a dream. I *was* being suffocated. But in my case the suffocation was not complete, whereas Malahide and Forden died, according to the doctors, in their sleep. They did not even wake. They knew no pain. . . .

Glossary

seriatim—in a series

vox humana—a reed stop on the pipe organ, so named because of its supposed resemblance to the human voice. (Wikipedia)

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