Initiation

by Algernon Blackwood

A few years ago, on a Black Sea steamer heading for the Caucasus, I fell into conversation with an American. He mentioned that he was on his way to the Baku oil-fields, and I replied that I was going up into the mountains. He looked at me questioningly a moment. "Your first trip?" he asked with interest. I said it was. A conversation followed; it was continued the next day, and renewed the following day, until we parted company at Batoum. I don't know why he talked so freely to me in particular. Normally, he was a taciturn, silent man. We had been fellow travellers from Marseilles, but after Constantinople we had the boat pretty much to ourselves. What struck me about him was his vehement, almost passionate, love of natural beauty in seas and woods and sky, but above all in mountains. It was like a religion in him. His taciturn manner hid deep poetic feeling.

And he told me it had not always been so with him. A kind of friendship sprang up between us. He was a New York business man buying and selling exchange between banks but was English born. He had gone out thirty years before, and become naturalised. His talk was exceedingly "American," slangy, and almost Western. He said he had roughed it in the West for a year or two first. But what he chiefly talked about was mountains. He said it was in the mountains an unusual experience had come to him that had opened his eyes to many things, but principally to the beauty that was now everything to him, and to the insignificance of death.

He knew the Caucasus well where I was going. I think that was why he was interested in me and my journey. "Up there," he said, "you'll feel things and maybe find out things you never knew before."

"What kind of things?" I asked.

"Why, for one," he replied with emotion and enthusiasm in his voice, "that living and dying ain't either of them of much account. That if you know Beauty, I mean, and Beauty is in your life, you live on in it and with it for others even when you're dead."

The conversation that followed is too long to give here, but it led to his telling me the experience in his own life that had opened his eyes to the truth of what he said. "Beauty is imperishable," he declared, "and if you live with it, why, you're imperishable too!"

The story, as he told it verbally in his curious language, remains vividly in my memory. But he had written it down, too, he said. And he gave me the written account, with the remark that I was free to hand it on to others if I "felt that way." He called it "Initiation." It runs as follows.

I

In my own family this happened, for Arthur was my nephew. And a remote Alpine valley was the place. It didn't seem to me in the least suitable for such occurrences, except that it was Catholic, and the "Church," I understand—at least, scholars who ought to know have told me so—has subtle Pagan origins incorporated unwittingly in its observations of certain Saints' Days, as well as in certain ceremonials. All this kind of thing is Dutch to me, a form of poetry or superstition, for I am interested chiefly in the buying and selling of exchange, with an office in New York City, just off Wall Street, and only come to Europe now occasionally for a holiday. I like to see the dear old musty cities, and go to the Opera, and take a motor run through Shakespeare's country or round the Lakes, get in touch again with London and Paris at the Ritz Hotels and then back again to the greatest city on earth, where for years now I've been making a good thing out of it. Repton and Cambridge, long since forgotten, had their uses. They were all right enough at the time. But I'm now "on the make," with a good fat partnership, and have left all that truck behind me.

My half-brother, however—he was my senior and got the cream of the family wholesale chemical works—has stuck to the trade in the Old Country, and is making probably as much as I am. He approved my taking the chance that offered, and is only sore now because his son, Arthur, is on the stupid side. He agreed that finance suited my temperament far better than drugs and chemicals, though he warned me that all American finance was speculative and therefore dangerous. "Arthur is getting on," he said in his last letter, "and will some day take the director's place you would be in now had you cared to stay. But he's a plodder, rather." That meant, I knew, that Arthur was a fool. Business, at any rate, was not suited to his temperament. Five years ago, when I came home with a month's holiday to be used in working up connections in English banking circles, I saw the boy. He was fifteen years of age at the time, a delicate youth, with an artist's dreams in his big blue eyes, if my

memory goes for anything, but with a tangle of yellow hair and features of classical beauty that would have made half the young girls of my New York set in love with him, and a choice of heiresses at his disposal when he wanted them.

I have a clear recollection of my nephew then. He struck me as having grit and character, but as being wrongly placed. He had his grandfather's tastes. He ought to have been, like him, a great scholar, a poet, an editor of marvellous old writings in new editions. I couldn't get much out of the boy, except that he "liked the chemical business fairly," and meant to please his father by "knowing it thoroughly" so as to qualify later for his directorship. But I have never forgotten the evening when I caught him in the hall, staring up at his grandfather's picture, with a kind of light about his face, and the big blue eyes all rapt and tender (almost as if he had been crying) and replying, when I asked him what was up: "*That* was worth living for. He brought Beauty back into the world!"

"Yes," I said, "I guess that's right enough. He did. But there was no money in it to speak of."

The boy looked at me and smiled. He twigged somehow or other that deep down in me, somewhere below the money-making instinct, a poet, but a dumb poet, lay in hiding. "You know what I mean," he said. "It's in you too."

The picture was a copy my father had it made of the presentation portrait given to Baliol, and "the grandfather" was celebrated in his day for the translations he made of Anacreon and Sappho, of Homer, too, if I remember rightly, as well as for a number of classical studies and essays that he wrote. A lot of stuff like that he did, and made a name at it too. His *Lives of the Gods* went into six editions. They said the big critics of his day that he was "a poet who wrote no poetry, yet lived it passionately in the spirit of old-world, classical Beauty," and I know he was a wonderful fellow in his way and made the dons and schoolmasters all sit up. We're proud of him all right. After twenty-five years of successful "exchange" in New York City, I confess I am unable to appreciate all that, feeling more in touch with the commercial and financial spirit of the age, progress, development and the rest. But, still, I'm not ashamed of the classical old boy, who seems to have been a good deal of a Pagan, judging by the records we have kept. However, Arthur peering up at that picture in the dusk, his eyes half moist with emotion, and his voice gone positively shaky, is a thing I never have forgotten. He stimulated my curiosity uncommonly. It stirred something deep down in me that I hardly cared to acknowledge on Wall Street something burning.

And the next time I saw him was in the summer of 1910, when I came to Europe for a two months' look around—my wife at Newport with the children—and hearing that he was in Switzerland, learning a bit of French to help him in the business, I made a point of dropping in upon him just to see how he was shaping generally and what new kinks his mind had taken on. There was something in Arthur I never could quite forget. Whenever his face came into my mind I began to think. A kind of longing came over me a desire for Beauty, I guess, it was. It made me dream.

I found him at an English tutor's a lively old dog, with a fondness for the cheap native wines, and a financial interest in the tourist development of the village. The boys learnt French in the mornings, possibly, but for the rest of the day were free to amuse themselves exactly as they pleased and without a trace of supervision provided the parents footed the bills without demur.

This suited everybody all round; and as long as the boys came home with an accent and a vocabulary, all was well. For myself, having learned in New York to attend strictly to my own business exchange between different countries with a profit I did not deem it necessary to exchange letters and opinions with my brother with no chance of profit anywhere. But I got to know Arthur, and had a queer experience of my own into the bargain. Oh, there was profit in it for me. I'm drawing big dividends to this day on the investment.

I put up at the best hotel in the village, a one-horse show, differing from the other inns only in the prices charged for a lot of cheap decoration in the dining-room, and went up to surprise my nephew with a call the first thing after dinner. The tutor's house stood some way back from the narrow street, among fields where there were more flowers than grass, and backed by a forest of fine old timber that stretched up several thousand feet to the snow. The snow at least was visible, peeping out far overhead just where the dark line of forest stopped; but in reality, I suppose, that was an effect of foreshortening, and whole valleys and pastures intervened between the trees and the snow-fields. The sunset, long since out of the valley, still shone on those white ridges, where the peaks stuck up like the teeth of a gigantic saw. I guess it meant five or six hours' good climbing to get up to them and nothing to do when you got

there. Switzerland, anyway, seemed a poor country, with its little bit of watch-making, sour wines, and every square yard hanging upstairs at an angle of 60 degrees used for hay. Picture postcards, chocolate and cheap tourists kept it going apparently, but I dare say it was all right enough to learn French in and cheap as Hoboken to live in!

Arthur was out; I just left a card and wrote on it that I would be very pleased if he cared to step down to take luncheon with me at my hotel next day. Having nothing better to do, I strolled homewards by way of the forest.

Now what came over me in that bit of dark pine forest is more than I can quite explain, but I think it must have been due to the height the village was 4,000 feet above sea-level and the effect of the rarefied air upon my circulation. The nearest thing to it in my experience is rye whisky, the queer touch of wildness, of self-confidence, a kind of whooping rapture and the reckless sensation of being a tin god of sorts that comes from a lot of alcohol—a memory, please understand, of years before, when I thought it a grand thing to own the earth and paint the old town red. I seemed to walk on air, and there was a smell about those trees that made me suddenly well, that took my mind clean out of its accustomed rut. It was just too lovely and wonderful for me to describe it. I had got well into the forest and lost my way a bit. The smell of an old-world garden wasn't in it. It smelt to me as if some one had just that minute turned out the earth all fresh and new. There was moss and tannin, a hint of burning, something between smoke and incense, say, and a fine clean odour of pitch-pine bark when the sun gets on it after rain and a flavour of the sea thrown in for luck. That was the first I noticed, for I had never smelt anything half so good since my camping days on the coast of Maine. And I stood still to enjoy it. I threw away my cigar for fear of mixing things and spoiling it. "If that could be bottled," I said to myself, "it'd sell for two dollars a pint in every city in the Union!"

And it was just then, while standing and breathing it in, that I got the queer feeling of some one watching me. I kept quite still. Some one was moving near me. The sweat went trickling down my back. A kind of childhood thrill got hold of me.

It was very dark. I was not afraid exactly, but I was a stranger in these parts and knew nothing about the habits of the mountain peasants. There might be tough customers lurking around after dark on the chance of striking some guy of a tourist with money in his pockets. Yet, somehow, that wasn't the kind of feeling that came to me at all, for, though I had a pocket Browning at my hip, the notion of getting at it did not even occur to me. The sensation was new—a kind of lifting, exciting sensation that made my heart swell out with exhilaration. There was happiness in it. A cloud that *weighed* seemed to roll off my mind, same as that light-hearted mood when the office door is locked and I'm off on a two months' holiday with gaiety and irresponsibility at the back of it. It was invigorating. I felt youth sweep over me.

I stood there, wondering what on earth was coming on me, and half expecting that any moment some one would come out of the darkness and show himself; and as I held my breath and made no movement at all the queer sensation grew stronger. I believe I even resisted a temptation to kick up my heels and dance, to let out a flying shout as a man with liquor in him does. Instead of this, however, I just kept dead still. The wood was black as ink all round me, too black to see the tree-trunks separately, except far below where the village lights came up twinkling between them, and the only way I kept the path was by the soft feel of the pine-needles that were thicker than a Brussels carpet. But nothing happened, and no one stirred. The idea that I was being watched remained, only there was no sound anywhere except the roar of falling water that filled the entire valley. Yet some one was very close to me in the darkness.

I can't say how long I might have stood there, but I guess it was the best part of ten minutes, and I remember it struck me that I had run up against a pocket of extra-rarefied air that had a lot of oxygen in it—oxygen or something similar—and that was the cause of my elation. The idea was nonsense, I have no doubt; but for the moment it half explained the thing to me. I realised it was all *natural* enough, at any rate and so maved on. It took a longish time to reach the edge of the wood, and a footpath led me—oh, it was quite a walk, I tell you—into the village street again. I was both glad and sorry to get there. I kept myself busy thinking the whole thing over again. What caught me all of a heap was that million-dollar sense of beauty, youth, and happiness. Never in my born days had I felt anything to touch it. And it hadn't cost a cent!

Well, I was sitting there enjoying my smoke and trying to puzzle it all out, and the hall was pretty full of people smoking and talking and reading papers, and so forth, when all of a sudden I looked up and caught my breath with such a jerk that I actually bit

my tongue. There was grandfather in front of my chair! I looked into his eyes. I saw him as clear and solid as the porter standing behind his desk across the lounge, and it gave me a touch of cold all down the back that I needn't forget unless I want to. He was looking into my face, and he had a cap in his hand, and he was speaking to me. It was my grandfather's picture come to life, only much thinner and younger and a kind of light in his eyes like fire.

"I beg your pardon, but you are Uncle Jim, aren't you?"

And then, with another jump of my nerves, I understood.

"You, Arthur! Well, I'm jiggered. So it is. Take a chair, boy. I'm right glad you found me. Shake! Sit down." And I shook his hand and pushed a chair up for him. I was never so surprised in my life. The last time I set eyes on him he was a boy. Now he was a young man, and the very image of his ancestor.

He sat down, fingering his cap. He wouldn't have a drink and he wouldn't smoke. "All right," I said, "let's talk then. I've lots to tell you and I've lots to hear. How are you, boy?"

He didn't answer at first. He eyed me up and down. He hesitated. He was as handsome as a young Greek god.

"I say, Uncle Jim," he began presently, "it was you just now in the wood wasn't it?" It made me start, that question put so quietly.

"I *have* just come through that wood up there," I answered, pointing in the direction as well as I could remember, "if that's what you mean. But why? You weren't there, were you?" It gave me a queer sort of feeling to hear him say it. What in the name of heaven did he mean?

He sat back in his chair with a sigh of relief.

"Oh, that's all right then," he said, "if it *was* you. Did you see," he asked suddenly; "did you see anything?"

"Not a thing," I told him honestly. "It was far too dark." I laughed. I fancied I twigged his meaning. But I was not the sort of uncle to come prying on him. Life must be dull enough, I remembered, in this mountain village.

But he didn't understand my laugh. He didn't mean what I meant.

And there came a pause between us. I discovered that we were talking different lingoes. I leaned over towards him.

"Look here, Arthur," I said in a lower voice, "what is it, and what do you mean? I'm all right, you know, and you needn't be afraid of telling me. What d'you mean by did I see anything?"

We looked each other squarely in the eye. He saw he could trust me, and I saw well, a whole lot of things, perhaps, but I felt chiefly that he liked me and would tell me things later, all in his own good time. I liked him all the better for that too.

"I only meant," he answered slowly, "whether you really *saw*—anything?"

"No," I said straight, "I didn't see a thing, but, by the gods, I *felt* something."

He started. I started too. An astonishing big look came swimming over his fair, handsome face. His eyes seemed all lit up. He looked as if he'd just made a cool million in wheat or cotton.

"I knew you were that sort," he whispered. "Though I hardly remembered what you looked like."

"Then what on earth was it?" I asked.

His reply staggered me a bit. "It was just that," he said "the Earth!"

And then, just when things were getting interesting and promising a dividend, he shut up like a clam. He wouldn't say another word. He asked after my family and business, my health, what kind of crossing I'd had, and all the rest of the common stock. It fairly bowled me over. And I couldn't change him either.

I suppose in America we get pretty free and easy, and don't quite understand reserve. But this young man of half my age kept me in my place as easily as I might have kept a nervous customer quiet in my own office. He just refused to take me on. He was polite and cool and distant as you please, and when I got pressing sometimes he simply pretended he didn't understand. I could no more get him back again to the subject of the wood than a customer could have gotten me to tell him about the prospects of exchange being cheap or dear when I didn't know myself but wouldn't let him see I didn't know. He was charming, he was delightful, enthusiastic and even affectionate; downright glad to see me, too, and to chin with me but I couldn't draw him worth a cent. And in the end I gave up trying.

And the moment I gave up trying he let down a little but only a very little.

"You'll stay here some time, Uncle Jim, won't you?"

"That's my idea," I said, "if I can see you, and you can show me round some."

He laughed with pleasure. "Oh, rather. I've got lots of time. After three in the afternoon I'm free till any time you like. There's a lot to see," he added.

"Come along to-morrow then," I said. "If you can't take lunch, perhaps you can come just afterwards. You'll find me waiting for you right here."

"I'll come at three," he replied, and we said good-night.

II

He turned up sharp at three, and I liked his punctuality. I saw him come swinging down the dusty road; tall, deep-chested, his broad shoulders a trifle high, and his head set proudly. He looked like a young chap in training, a thoroughbred, every inch of him. At the same time there was a touch of something a little too refined and delicate for a man, I thought. That was the poetic, scholarly vein in him, I guess grandfather cropping out. This time he wore no cap. His thick light hair, not brushed back like the London shop-boys, but parted on the side, yet untidy for all that, suited him exactly and gave him a touch of wildness.

"Well," he asked, "what would you like to do, Uncle Jim? I'm at your service, and I've got the whole afternoon till supper at seven-thirty." I told him I'd like to go through that wood. "All right," he said, "come along. I'll show you." He gave me one quick glance, but said no more. "I'd like to see if I feel anything this time," I explained. "We'll locate the very spot, maybe." He nodded.

"You know where I mean, don't you?" I asked, "because you saw me there?" He just said yes, and then we started.

It was hot, and air was scarce. I remember that we went uphill, and that I realised there was considerable difference in our ages. We crossed some fields first smothered in flowers so thick that I wondered how much grass the cows got out of it ! and then came to a sprinkling of fine young larches that looked as soft as velvet. There was no path, just a wild mountain side. I had very little breath on the steep zigzags, but Arthur talked easily and talked mighty well, too: the light and shade, the colouring, and the effect of all this wilderness of lonely beauty on the mind. He kept all this suppressed at home in business. It was safety valves. I twigged that. It was the artist in him talking. He seemed to think there was nothing in the world but Beauty with a big B all the time. And the odd thing was he took for granted that I felt the same. It was cute of him to flatter me that way. "Daulis and the lone Cephissian vale," I heard; and a few moments later with a sort of reverence in his voice like worship he called out a great singing name: *"Astarte!"*

> "Day is her face, and midnight is her hair,
> And morning hours are but the golden stair
> By which she climbs to Night."

It was here first that a queer change began to grow upon me too.

"Steady on, boy! I've forgotten all my classics ages ago," I cried.

He turned and gazed down on me, his big eyes glowing, and not a sign of perspiration on his skin.

"That's nothing," he exclaimed in his musical, deep voice. "You know it, or you'd never have felt things in this wood last night; and you wouldn't have wanted to come out with me now!"

"How?" I gasped. "How's that?"

"You've come," he continued quietly, "to the only valley in this artificial country that has atmosphere. This valley is *alive* especially this end of it. There's superstition here, thank God! Even the peasants know things." I stared at him. "See here, Arthur," I objected. "I'm not a Cath. And I don't know a thing—at least it's all dead in me and forgotten about poetry or classics or your gods and pan—pantheism—in spite of grandfather—" His face turned like a dream face.

"Hush!" he said quickly. "Don't mention *him*. There's a bit of him in you as well as in me, and it was here, you know, he wrote—"

I didn't hear the rest of what he said. A creep came over me. I remembered that this ancestor of ours lived for years in the isolation of some Swiss forest where he claimed he used that setting for his writing he had found the exiled gods, their ghosts, their beauty, their eternal essences or something astonishing of that sort. I had clean forgotten it till this moment. It all rushed back upon me, a memory of my boyhood.

And, as I say, a creep came over me something as near to awe as ever could be. The sunshine on that field of yellow daisies and blue forget-me-nots turned pale. That warm valley wind had a touch of snow in it. And, ashamed and frightened of my baby mood, I looked at Arthur, meaning to choke him off with all this rubbish and then saw something in his eyes that scared me stiff.

I admit it. What's the use? There was an expression on his fine big face that made my blood go curdled. I got cold feet right there. It mastered me. In

him, behind him, near him—blest if I know which, *through* him probably—came an enormous thing that turned me insignificant. It downed me utterly.

It was over in a second, the flash of a wing. I recovered instantly. No mere boy should come these muzzy tricks on me, scholar or no scholar. For the change in me was on the increase, and I shrank.

"See here, Arthur," I said plainly once again, "I don't know what your game is, but there's something queer up here I don't quite get at. I'm only a business man, with classics and poetry all gone dry in me twenty years ago and more "

He looked at me so strangely that I stopped, confused.

"But, Uncle Jim," he said as quietly as though we talked tobacco brands, "you needn't be alarmed. It's natural you should feel the place. You and I belong to it. We've both got *him* in us. You're just as proud of him as I am, only in a different way." And then he added, with a touch of disappointment: "I thought you'd like it. You weren't afraid last night. You felt the beauty *then*."

Flattery is a darned subtle thing at any time. To see him standing over me in that superior way and talking down at my poor business mind well, it just came over me that I was laying my cards on the table a bit too early. After so many years of city life!

Anyway, I pulled myself together. "I was only kidding you, boy," I laughed. "I feel this beauty just as much as you do. Only, I guess, you're more accustomed to it than I am. Come on now," I added with energy, getting upon my feet, "let's push on and see the wood. I want to find that place again."

He pulled me with a hand of iron, laughing as he did so. Gee! I wished I had his teeth, as well as the muscles in his arm. Yet I felt younger, somehow, too —youth flowed more and more into my veins. I had forgotten how sweet the winds and woods and flowers could be. Something melted in me. For it was Spring, and the whole world was singing like a dream. Beauty was creeping over me. I don't know. I began to feel all big and tender and open to a thousand wonderful sensations. The thought of streets and houses seemed like death. . . .

We went on again, not talking much; my breath got shorter and shorter, and he kept looking about him as though he expected something. But we passed no living soul, not even a peasant; there were no chalets, no cattle, no cattle shelters even. And then I realised that the valley lay at our feet in haze and that we had been climbing at least a couple of hours. "Why, last night I got home in twenty minutes at the outside," I said. He shook his head, smiling. "It seemed like that," he replied, "but you really took much longer. It was long after ten when I found you in the hall." I reflected a moment. "Now I come to think of it, you're right, Arthur. Seems curious, though, somehow." He looked closely at me. "I followed you all the way," he said.

"You followed me!"

"And you went at a good pace too. It was your feelings that made it seem so short—you were singing to yourself and happy as a dancing faun. We kept close behind you for a long way."

I think it was "we" he said, but for some reason or other I didn't care to ask.

"Maybe," I answered shortly, trying uncomfortably to recall what particular capers I had cut. "I guess that's right." And then I added something about the loneliness, and how deserted all this slope of mountain was. And he explained that the peasants were afraid of it and called it No Man's Land. From one year's end to another no human foot went up or down it; the hay was never cut; no cattle grazed along the splendid pastures; no chalet had even been built within a mile of the wood we slowly made for. "They're superstitious," he told me. "It was just the same a hundred years ago when *he* discovered it—there was a little natural cave on the edge of the forest where he used to sleep sometimes—I'll show it to you presently but for generations this entire mountain-side has been undisturbed. You'll never meet a living soul in any part of it." He stopped and pointed above us to where the pine wood hung in mid-air, like a dim blue carpet. "It's just the place for Them, you see."

And a thrill of power went smashing through me. I can't describe it. It drenched me like a waterfall. I thought of Greece—Mount Ida and a thousand songs! Something in me—it was like the click of a shutter—announced that the "change" was suddenly complete. I was another man; or rather a deeper part of me took command. My very language showed it.

The calm of halcyon weather lay over all. Overhead the peaks rose clear as crystal; below us the village lay in a bluish smudge of smoke and haze, as though a great finger had rubbed them softly into the earth. Absolute loneliness fell upon me like a clap. From the world of human beings we seemed quite shut off. And there began to steal over me again the strange elation of the night before. . . . We found

ourselves almost at once against the edge of the wood.

It rose in front of us, a big wall of splendid trees, motionless as if cut out of dark green metal, the branches hanging stiff, and the crowd of trunks lost in the blue dimness underneath. I shaded my eyes with one hand, trying to peer into the solemn gloom. The contrast between the brilliant sunshine on the pastures and this region of heavy shadows blurred my sight.

"It's like the entrance to another world," I whispered.

"It is," said Arthur, watching me. "We will go in. You shall pluck asphodel...."

And, before I knew it, he had me by the hand. We were advancing. We left the light behind us. The cool air dropped upon me like a sheet. There was a temple silence. The sun ran down behind the sky, leaving a marvellous blue radiance everywhere. Nothing stirred. But through the stillness there rose power, power that has no name, power that hides at the foundations somewhere—foundations that are changeless, invisible, everlasting. What do I mean? My mind grew to the dimensions of a planet. We were among the roots of life whence issues that *one thing* in infinite guise that seeks so many temporary names from the protean minds of men.

"You shall pluck asphodel in the meadows this side of Erebus," Arthur was chanting. "Hermes himself, the Psychopomp, shall lead, and Malahide shall welcome us."

Malahide . . . !

To hear him use that name, the name of our scholar-ancestor, now dead and buried close upon a century—the way he half chanted it gave me the goose-flesh. I stopped against a tree-stem, thinking of escape. No words came to me at the moment, for I didn't know what to say; but, on turning to find the bright green slopes just left behind, I saw only a crowd of trees and shadows hanging thick as a curtain as though we had walked a mile. And it was a shock. The way out was lost. The trees closed up behind us like a tide.

"It's all right," said Arthur; "just keep an open mind and a heart alive with love. It has a shattering effect at first, but that will pass." He saw I was afraid, for I shrank visibly enough. He stood beside me in his grey flannel suit, with his brilliant eyes and his great shock of hair, looking more like a column of light than a human being. "It's all quite right and natural," he repeated; "we have passed the gateway, and Hecate, who presides over gateways, will let us out again. Do not make discord by feeling fear. This is a pine wood, and pines are the oldest, simplest trees; they are true primitives. They are an open channel; and in a pine wood where no human life has ever been you shall often find gateways where Hecate is kind to such as us."

He took my hand he must have felt mine trembling, but his own was cool and strong and felt like silver and led me forward into the depths of a wood that seemed to me quite endless. It felt endless, that is to say. I don't know what came over me. Fear slipped away, and elation took its place. . . . As we advanced over ground that seemed level, or slightly undulating, I saw bright pools of sunshine here and there upon the forest floor. Great shafts of light dropped in slantingly between the trunks. There was movement everywhere, though I never could see what moved. A delicious, scented air stirred through the lower branches. Running water sang not very far away. Figures I did not actually see; yet there were limbs and flowing draperies and flying hair from time to time, ever just beyond the pools of sunlight. . . . Surprise went from me too. I was on air. The atmosphere of dream came round me, but a dream of something just hovering outside the world I knew a dream wrought in gold and silver, with shining eyes, with graceful beckoning hands, and with voices that rang like bells of music. . . . And the pools of light grew larger, merging one into another, until a delicate soft light shone equably throughout the entire forest. Into this zone of light we passed together. Then something fell abruptly at our feet, as though thrown down . . . two marvellous, shining sprays of blossom such as I had never seen in all my days before!

"Asphodel !" cried my companion, stooping to pick them up and handing one to me. I took it from him with a delight I could not understand. "Keep it," he murmured; "it is the sign that we are welcome. For Malahide has dropped these on our path."

And at the use of that ancestral name it seemed that a spirit passed before my face and the hair of my head stood up. There was a sense of violent, unhappy contrast. A composite picture presented itself, then rushed away. What was it? My youth in England, music and poetry at Cambridge and my passionate love of Greek that lasted two terms at most, when Malahide's great books formed part of the curriculum. Over against this, then, the drag and smother of solid worldly business, the sordid weight

of modern ugliness, the bitterness of an ambitious, over-striving life. And abruptly beyond both pictures a shining, marvellous Beauty that scattered stars beneath my feet and scarved the universe with gold. All this flashed before me with the utterance of that old family name. An alternative sprang up. There seemed some radical, elemental choice presented to me to what I used to call my soul. My soul could take or leave it as it pleased. . . .

I looked at Arthur moving beside me like a shaft of light. What had come over me? How had our walk and talk and mood, our quite recent everyday and ordinary view, our normal relationship with the things of the world how had it all slipped into this? So insensibly, so easily, so naturally!

"Was it worth while?"

The question—*I* didn't ask it—jumped up in me of its own accord. Was "what" worth while? Why, my present life of commonplace and grubbing toil, of course; my city existence, with its meagre, unremunerative ambitions. Ah, it was this new Beauty calling me, this shining dream that lay beyond the two pictures I have mentioned. . . . I did not argue it, even to myself. But I understood. There was a radical change in me. The buried poet, too long hidden, rushed into the air like some great singing bird.

I glanced again at Arthur moving along lightly by my side, half dancing almost in his brimming happiness. "Wait till you see Them," I heard him singing. "Wait till you hear the call of Artemis and the footsteps of her flying nymphs. Wait till Orion thunders overhead and Selene, crowned with the crescent moon, drives up the zenith in her white-horsed chariot. The choice will be beyond all question then . . . !"

A great silent bird, with soft brown plumage, whirred across our path, pausing an instant as though to peep, then disappearing with a muted sound into an eddy of the wind it made. The big trees hid it. It was an owl. The same moment I heard a rush of liquid song come pouring through the forest with a gush of almost human notes, and a pair of glossy wings flashed past us, swerving upwards to find the open sky blue-black, pointed wings.

"His favourites!" exclaimed my companion with clear joy in his voice. "They all are here! Athene's bird, Procne and Philomela too! The owl the swallow and the nightingale! Tereus and Itys are not far away." And the entire forest, as he said it, stirred with movement, as though that great bird's quiet wings had waked the sea of ancient shadows. There were voices too ringing, laughing voices, as though his words woke echoes that had been listening for it. For I heard sweet singing in the distance. The names he had used perplexed me. Yet even I, stranger as I was to such refined delights, could not mistake the passion of the nightingale and the dart of the eager swallow. That wild burst of music, that curve of swift escape, were unmistakable.

And I struck a stalwart tree-stem with my open hand, feeling the need of hearing, touching, sensing it. My link with known, remembered things was breaking. I craved the satisfaction of the commonplace. I got that satisfaction; but I got something more as well. For the trunk was round and smooth and comely. It was no dead thing I struck. Somehow it brushed me into intercourse with inanimate Nature. And next the desire came to hear my voice—my own familiar, high-pitched voice with the twang and accent the New World climate brings, so-called American:

"Exchange Place, Noo York City. I'm in that business, buying and selling of exchange between the banks of two civilised countries, one of them stoopid and old-fashioned, the other leading all creation . . . !"

It was an effort, but I made it firmly. It sounded odd, remote, unreal.

"Sunlit woods and a wind among the branches," followed close and sweet upon my words. But who, in the name of Wall Street, said it?

"England's buying gold," I tried again. "We've had a private wire. Cut in quick. First National is selling!"

Great- faced Hephaestus, how ridiculous! It was like saying, "I'll take your scalp unless you give me meat." It was barbaric, savage, centuries ago. Again there came another voice that caught up my own and turned it into common syntax. Some heady beauty of the Earth rose about me like a cloud.

"Hark! Night comes, with the dusk upon her eyelids. She brings those dreams that every dew-drop holds at dawn. Daughter of Thanatos and Hypnos . . . !"

But again who said the words? It surely was not Arthur, my nephew Arthur, of To-day, learning French in a Swiss mountain village! I felt—well, what did I feel? In the name of the Stock Exchange and Wall Street, what was the cash surrender of amazing feelings?

III

And, turning to look at him, I made a discovery. I don't know how to tell it quite; such shadowy marvels have never been my line of goods. He looked several things at once—taller, slighter, sweeter, but chiefly—it sounds so crazy when I write it down—grander is the word, I think. And all spread out with some power that flowed like Spring when it pours upon a landscape. Eternally young and glorious young, I mean, in the sense of a field of flowers in the Spring looks young; and glorious in the sense the sky looks glorious at dawn or sunset. Something big shone through him like a storm, something that would go on for ever just as the Earth goes on, always renewing itself, something of gigantic life that—in the human sense—could never age at all—something the old gods had. But the figure, so far as there was any figure at all, was that old family picture come to life. Our great ancestor and Arthur were one being, and that one being was vaster than a million people. Yet it was Malahide I saw. . . .

"They laid me in the earth I loved," he said in a strange, thrilling voice like running wind and water, "and I found eternal life. I live now for ever in Their divine existence. I share the life that changes yet can never pass away."

I felt myself rising like a cloud as he said it. A roaring beauty captured me completely. If I could tell it in honest newspaper language the common language used in flats and offices why, I guess I could patent a new meaning in ordinary words, a new power of expression, the thing that all the churches and poets and thinkers have been trying to say since the world began. I caught on to a fact so fine and simple that it knocked me silly to think I'd never realised it before. I had read it, yes; but now I *knew* it. The Earth, the whole bustling universe, was nothing after all but a visible production of eternal, living Powers—spiritual powers, mind you—that just happened to include the particular little type of strutting creature we called mankind. And these Powers, as seen in Nature, were the gods. It was our refusal of their grand appeal, so wild and sweet and beautiful, that caused "evil." It was this barrier between ourselves and the rest of ...

My thoughts and feelings swept away upon the rising flood as the "figure" came upon me like a shaft of moonlight, melting the last remnant of opposition that was in me. I took my brain, my reason, chucking them aside for the futile little mechanism I suddenly saw them to be. In place of them came—oh, God, I hate to say it, for only nursery talk can get within a mile of it, and yet what I need is something simpler even than the words that children use. Under one arm I carried a whole forest breathing in the wind, and beneath the other a hundred meadows full of singing streams with golden marigolds and blue forget-me-nots along their banks. Upon my back and shoulders lay the clouded hills with dew and moonlight in their brimmed, capacious hollows. Thick in my hair hung the unaging powers that are stars and sunlight; though the sun was far away, it sweetened the currents of my blood with liquid gold. Breast and throat and face, as I advanced, met all the rivers of the world and all the winds of heaven, their strength and swiftness melting into me as light melts into everything it touches. And into my -eyes passed all the radiant colours that weave the cloth of Nature as she takes the sun.

And this "figure," pouring upon me like a burst of moonlight, spoke: "They all are in you—air, and fire, and water...."

"And I—my feet stand on the *Earth*," my own voice interrupted, deep power lifting through the sound of it.

"The Earth!" He laughed gigantically. He spread. He seemed everywhere about me. He seemed a race of men. My life swam forth in waves of some immense sensation that issued from the mountain and the forest, then returned to them again. I reeled. I clutched at something in me that was slipping beyond control, slipping down a bank towards a deep, dark river flowing at my feet. A shadowy boat appeared, a still more shadowy outline at the helm. I was in the act of stepping into it. For the tree I caught at was only air. I couldn't stop myself. I tried to scream.

"You have plucked asphodel," sang the voice beside me, "and you shall pluck more. ..."

I slipped and slipped, the speed increasing horribly. Then something caught, as though a cog held fast and stopped me. I remembered my business in New York City.

"Arthur!" I yelled. "Arthur!" I shouted again as hard as I could shout. There was frantic terror in me. I felt as though I should never get back to myself again. Death!

The answer came in his normal voice: "Keep close to me. I know the way...."

The scenery dwindled suddenly; the trees came back. I was walking in the forest beside my nephew,

and the moonlight lay in patches and little shafts of silver. The crests of the pines just murmured in a wind that scarcely stirred, and through an opening on our right I saw the deep valley clasped about the twinkling village lights. Towering in splendour, the spectral snowfields hung upon the sky, huge summits guarding them. And Arthur took my arm—oh, solidly enough this time. Thank heaven, he asked no questions of me.

"There's a smell of myrrh," he whispered, "and we are very near the undying, ancient things."

I said something about the resin from the trees, but he took no notice.

"It enclosed its body in an egg of myrrh," he went on, smiling down at me; "then, setting it on fire, rose from the ashes with its life renewed. Once every five hundred years, you see."

"What did?" I cried, feeling that loss of self stealing over me again. And his answer came like a blow between the eyes:

"The Phoenix. They called it a bird, but, of course, the true ..."

"But my life's insured in that," I cried, for he had named the company that took large yearly premiums from me; "and I pay ..."

"Your life's insured in *this*," he said quietly, waving his arms to indicate the Earth. "Your love of Nature and your sympathy with it make you safe." He gazed at me. There was a marvellous expression in his eyes. I understood why poets talked of stars and flowers in a human face. But behind the face crept back another look as well. There grew about his figure an indeterminate extension. The outline of Malahide again stirred through his own. A pale, delicate hand reached out to take my own. And something broke in me.

I was conscious of two things—a burst of joy that meant losing myself entirely, and a rush of terror that meant staying as I was, a small, painful, struggling item of individual life. Another spray of that awful asphodel fell fluttering through the air in front of my face. It rested on the earth against my feet. And Arthur—this weirdly changing Arthur stooped to pick it for me. I kicked it with my foot beyond his reach . . . then turned and ran as though the Furies of that ancient world were after me. I ran for my very life. How I escaped from that thick wood without banging my body to bits against the trees I can't explain. I ran from something I desired and yet feared. I leaped along in a succession of flying bounds. Each tree I passed turned of its own accord and flung after me until the entire forest followed. But I got out. I reached the open. Upon the sloping field in the full, clear light of the moon I collapsed in a panting heap. The Earth drew back with a great shuddering sigh behind me. There was this strange, tumultuous sound upon the night. I lay beneath the open heavens that were full of moonlight. I was myself but there were tears in me. Beauty too high for understanding had slipped between my fingers. I had lost Malahide. I had lost the gods of Earth. . . . Yet I had seen . . . and felt. I had not lost all. Something remained that I could never lose again. . . .

I don't know how it happened exactly, but presently I heard Arthur saying: "You'll catch your death of cold if you lie on that soaking grass," and felt his hand seize mine to pull me to my feet.

"I feel safer on earth," I believe I answered. And then he said: "Yes, but it's such a stupid way to die—a chill!"

IV

I got up then, and we went downhill together towards the village lights. I danced—oh, I admit it—I sang as well. There was a flood of joy and power about me that beat anything I'd ever felt before. I didn't think or hesitate; there was no self-consciousness; I just let it rip for all there was, and if there had been ten thousand people there in front of me, I could have made them feel it too. That was the kind of feeling power and confidence and a sort of raging happiness. I think I know what it was too. I say this soberly, with reverence ... all wool and no fading. There was a bit of God in me, God's power that drives the Earth and pours through Nature—the imperishable Beauty expressed in those old-world nature-deities!

And the fear I'd felt was nothing but the little tickling point of losing my ordinary two-cent self, the dread of letting go, the shrinking before the plunge what a fellow feels when he's falling in love, and hesitates, and tries to think it out and hold back, and is afraid to let the enormous tide flow in and drown him.

Oh, yes, I began to think it over a bit as we raced down the mountain-side that glorious night. I've read some in my day; my brain's all right; I've heard of dual personality and subliminal uprush and conversion—no new line of goods, all that. But somehow these stunts of the psychologists and philosophers

didn't cut any ice with me just then, because I'd *experienced* what they merely *explained*. And explanation was just a bargain sale. The best things can't be explained at all. There's no real value in a bargain sale.

Arthur had trouble to keep up with me. We were running due east, and the Earth was turning, therefore, with us. We all three ran together at *her* pace—terrific! The moonlight danced along the summits, and the snowfields flew like spreading robes, and the forests everywhere, far and near, hung watching us and booming like a thousand organs. There were uncaged winds about; you could hear them whistling among the precipices. But the great thing that I knew was Beauty, a beauty of the common old familiar Earth, and a beauty that's stayed with me ever since, and given me joy and strength and a source of power and delight I'd never guessed existed before.

As we dropped lower into the thicker air of the valley I sobered down. Gradually the ecstasy passed from me. We slowed up a bit. The lights and the houses and the sight of the hotel where people were dancing in a stuffy ballroom, all this put blotting-paper on something that had been flowing.

Now you'll think this an odd thing too but when we reached the village street, I just took Arthur's hand and shook it and said good-night and went up to bed and slept like a two-year-old till morning. And from that day to this I've never set eyes on the boy again.

Perhaps it's difficult to explain, and perhaps it isn't. I can explain it to myself in two lines—I was afraid to see him. I was afraid he might "explain." I was afraid he might explain "away." I just left a note—he never replied to it—and went off by a morning train. Can you understand that? Because if you can't you haven't understood this account I've tried to give of the experience Arthur gave me. Well anyway I'll just let it go at that.

Arthur's a director now in his father's wholesale chemical business, and I—well, I'm doing better than ever in the buying and selling of exchange between banks in New York City as before.

But when I said I was still drawing dividends on my Swiss investment, I meant it. And it's not "scenery." Everybody gets a thrill from "scenery." It's a darned sight more than that. It's those little wayward patches of blue on a cloudy day; those blue pools in the sky just above Trinity Church steeple when I pass out of Wall Street into Lower Broadway; it's the rustle of the sea-wind among the Battery trees; the wash of the waves when the Ferry's starting for Staten Island, and the glint of the sun far down the Bay, or dropping a bit of pearl into the old East River. And sometimes it's the strip of cloud in the west above the Jersey shore of the Hudson, the first star, the sickle of the new moon behind the masts and shipping. But usually it's something nearer, bigger, simpler than all or any of these. It's just the certainty that, when I hurry along the hard stone pavements from bank to bank, I'm walking on the Earth. It's just that—*the Earth!*

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