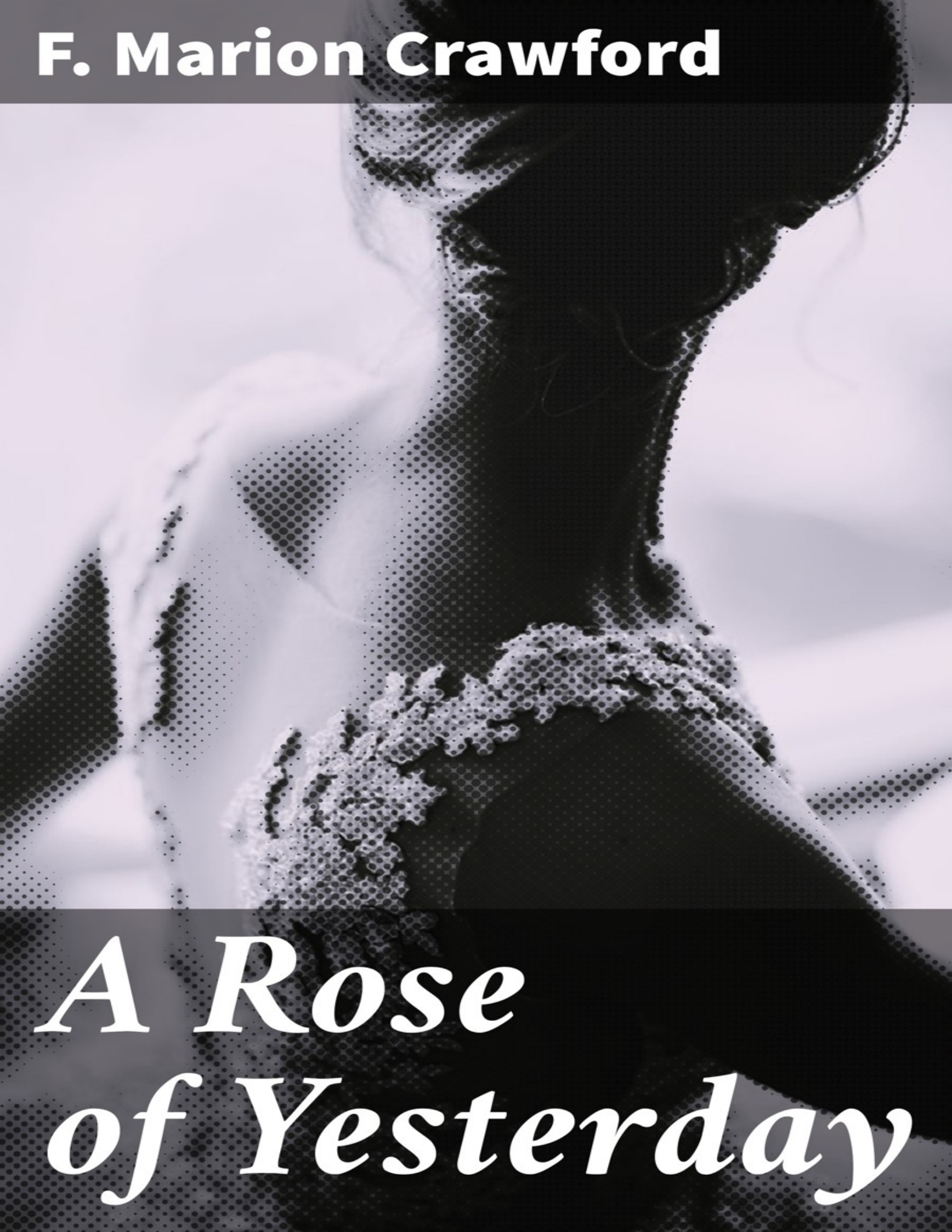
F. Marion Crawford



# A Rose of Yesterday

**F. Marion Crawford**

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# CHAPTER I

"I wonder what he meant by it," said Sylvia, turning again in her chair, so that the summer light, softened and tinted by the drawn blinds, might fall upon the etching she held.

"My dear," answered Colonel Wimpole, stretching out his still graceful legs, leaning back in his chair, and slowly joining his nervous but handsome hands, "nobody knows."

He did not move again for some time, and his ward continued to scrutinize Dürer's Knight. It was the one known as 'The Knight, Death, and the Devil,' and she had just received it from her guardian as a birthday present.

"But people must have thought a great deal about it," said Sylvia, at last. "There must be stories about what it means. Do tell me. I'm sure you know."

She laid the unframed print upon her knees, still holding it by the edges, lest the fitful breeze that came in through the blinds should blow it to the floor. At the same time she raised her eyes till they met the colonel's.

Her earnest young face expressed something like veneration as she gazed at him, and perhaps he thought that it was undeserved, for he soon looked away, with a faint sigh. She sighed, too, but more audibly, as though she were not ashamed of it. Possibly she knew that he could not guess what the sigh meant, and the knowledge added a little pain to what she felt just then, and had felt daily of late. She began to study the etching again.

"To me," she said softly, "the Knight is a hero. He is making Death show him the way, and he has made the Devil his squire and servant. He will reach the city on the hill in time, for there is still sand enough in the hour-glass. Do you see?" She held out the print to the colonel. "There is still sand enough," she repeated. "Don't you think so?"

Again, as she asked the question, she looked at him; but he was bending over the etching, and she could only see his clear profile against the shadows of the room.

"He may be just in time," he answered quietly.

"I wonder which house they lived in, of those one can see," said Sylvia.

"Who are 'they'? Death, the Devil, and the Knight?"

"No. The Knight and the lady, of course,--the lady who is waiting to see whether he will come in time."

The colonel laughed a little at her fancy, and looked at her as the breeze stirred her brown hair. He did not understand her, and she knew that he did not. His glance took in her brown hair, her violet eyes, her delicately shaded cheek, and the fresh young mouth with its strange little half-weary smile that should not have been there, and that left the weariness behind whenever it faded for a time. He wondered what was the matter with the girl.

She was not ill. That was clear enough, for they had travelled far, and Sylvia had never once seemed tired. The colonel and Miss Wimpole, his elderly maiden sister, had taken Sylvia out to Japan to meet her father, Admiral Strahan, who had been stationed some time with a small squadron in the waters of the far East. He had been ordered home rather suddenly, and the Wimpoles were bringing the

girl back by way of Europe. Sylvia's mother had been dead three years, and had left her a little fortune. Mrs. Strahan had been a step-sister, and no blood relation, of the Wimpoles; but they had been as a real brother and a real sister to her, and she had left her only child to their care during such times as her husband's service should keep him away from home. The girl was now just eighteen.

Colonel Wimpole wondered whether she could be destined for suffering, as some women are, and the thought linked itself to the chain of another life, and drew it out of his heart that he might see it and be hurt, for he had known pain in himself and through one he loved. He could not believe that Sylvia was forefated to sorrow, and the silent weariness that of late was always in her face meant something which he feared to learn, but for which he felt himself vaguely responsible, as though he were not doing his duty by her.

He was a man of heart, of honour, and of conscience. Long ago, in his early youth, he had fought bravely in a long and cruel war, and had remained a soldier for many years afterwards, with an old-fashioned attachment for arms that was dashed with chivalry, till at last he had hung up his sword, accepting peace as a profession. Indeed he had never loved anything of war, except its danger and its honour; and he had loved one woman more than either, but not against honour nor in danger, though without any hope.

He had lived simply, as some men can and as a few do live, in the midst of the modern world, parting with an illusion now and then, and fostering some new taste in its place, in a sort of innocent and simple consciousness that it

was artificial, but in the certainty that it was harmless. He was gentle in his ways, with the quiet and unaffected feeling for other people which not seldom softens those who have fought with their hands in the conviction of right, and have dealt and received real wounds. War either brutalizes or refines a man; it never leaves him unchanged. Colonel Wimpole had travelled from time to time, more for the sake of going to some one place which he wished to see, than of passing through many places for the sake of travelling. There is a great difference between the two methods. Wherever he went, he took with him his own character and his slightly formal courtesy of manner, not leaving himself at home, as some people do, nor assuming a separate personality for Europe, like a disguise; for, such as he was, he was incapable of affectation, and he was sure that the manners which had been good enough for his mother were good enough for any woman in the world, as indeed they were, because he was a gentleman, that is, a man, and gentle at all points, excepting for his honour. But no one had ever touched that.

He looked what he was, too, from head to foot. He was a tall, slender man, of nervous strength, with steady grey eyes, high features, smooth, short and grizzled hair; simple and yet very scrupulous in his dress; easy in his movements; not old before his time, but having already something of the refinement of age upon the nobility of his advanced manhood; one of whom a woman would expect great things in an extremity, but to whom she would no longer turn for the little service, the little fetching and carrying, which most women expect of men still in prime.

But he did such things unasked, and for any woman, when it seemed natural to do them. After all, he was only fifty-three years old, and it seems to be established that sixty is the age of man's manumission from servitude, unless the period of slavery be voluntarily extended by the individual. That leaves ten years of freedom if one live to the traditional age of mankind.

But Sylvia saw no sign of age in Colonel Wimpole. In connexion with him the mere word irritated her when he used it, which he sometimes did quite naturally, and he would have been very much surprised could he have guessed how she thought of him, and what she was thinking as she sat looking from him to Dürer's Knight and from the etched rider to the living man again. For she saw a resemblance which by no means existed, except, perhaps, between two ideals.

The Knight in the picture is stern and strong and grim, and sits his horse like the incarnation of an unchanging will, riding a bridled destiny against Death and Evil to a good end. And Death's tired jade droops its white head and sniffs at the skull in the way, but the Knight's charger turns up his lip and shows his teeth at the carrion thing and arches his strong neck, while the Knight looks straight before him, and cares not, and his steel-clad legs press the great horse into the way, and his steel-gloved hand holds curb and snaffle in a vise. As for the Devil, he slinks behind, an evil beast, but subdued, and following meanly with a sort of mute, animal astonishment in his wide eyes.

And beside Sylvia sat the colonel, quiet, gentle, restful, suggesting just then nothing of desperate determination,

and not at all like the grim Knight in feature. Yet the girl felt a kinship between the two, and saw one and the same heroism in the man and in the pictured rider. In her inmost heart she wished that she could have seen the colonel long ago, when he had fought, riding at death without fear. But the thought that it had been so very long ago kept the wish down, below the word-line in her heart's well. Youth clothes its ideals with the spirit of truth and hides the letter out of sight.

But in the picture, Sylvia looked for herself, since it was for a lady that the Knight was riding, and all she could find was the big old house up in the town, on the left of the tallest tower. She was waiting somewhere under the high-gabled roof, with her spinning-wheel or her fine needlework, among her women. Would he ever come? Was there time before the sand in Death's hour-glass should run out?

"I wish the horse would put his fore foot down, and go on!" she said suddenly.

Then she laughed, though a little wearily. How could she tell the colonel that he was the Knight, and that she was waiting in the tall house with the many windows? Perhaps he was never to know, and forever the charger's fore foot would be lifted, ready for the step that was never to fall upon the path.

But Colonel Wimpole did not understand. It was unlike her to wish that an old print should turn into a page from a child's movable picture-book.

"Why do you wish that the horse would go on?" he asked half idly.

"Because the sand will not last, if he waits," said Sylvia, quietly; and as she spoke a third time of the sand in the hour-glass, she felt a little chill at her heart.

"There will always be time," answered the colonel, enigmatically.

"As there will always be air, I suppose; and that will not matter to us, when we are not here to breathe it any more."

"That is true. Nothing will matter very much a hundred years hence."

"But a few years matter much more than a hundred." Her voice was sad.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Colonel Wimpole, changing his position so as to see her face better.

He resented her sadness a little, for he and his sister were doing their best to make her happy. But Sylvia did not answer him. She bent her white forehead to the faint breeze that came through the closed green blinds, and she looked at the etching. The colonel believed that she was thinking of her dead mother, whom she had loved. He hesitated, choosing his words, for he hated preaching, and yet it seemed to him that Sylvia mourned too long.

"I was very fond of your mother, too, my dear," he said gently, after a time. "She was like a real sister to us. I wish I could have gone instead, and left her to you."

"You?" Sylvia's voice startled him; she was suddenly pale, and the old print shook in her hands. "Oh, no!" she cried half passionately. "Not you--not you!"

The colonel was surprised for a moment. Then he was grateful, for he felt that she was very fond of him. He

thought of the woman he loved, and that he might have had such a daughter as Sylvia, but with other eyes.

"I am glad you are fond of me," he said. "You are very good to me, and I know I am a tiresome old man."

At that word, one beat of the girl's heart sent resentful blood to her face.

"You are not old at all!" she cried. "And you could not be tiresome if you tried! And I am not good to you, as you call it!"

The girl's young anger made him think of summer lightning, and of the sudden flashing of new steel drawn silently and swiftly from the sheath into the sunshine.

"Goodness may be a matter of opinion, my dear," said he. "But age is a matter of fact. I was fifty-three years old on my last birthday."

"Oh, what do years matter?" Sylvia rose quickly and turned from him, going towards the window.

The colonel watched her perfectly graceful movements. She wore grey, with a small black band at her throat, and the soft light clung to the lovely outline of her figure and to her brown hair. He thought again of the daughter that might have been born to him, and even of a daughter's daughter. It seemed to him that his own years might be a greater matter than Sylvia would admit. Yet, as their descending mists veiled hope's height, he was often glad that there should not be as many more as there had been. He said nothing, and there was a dream in his eyes.

"You are always saying that you are old. Why?" Sylvia's voice came from the window, but she did not turn. "It is not kind," she said, still more softly.

"Not kind?" He did not understand.

"It is not kind to me. It is as though I did not care. Besides, it is not true!"

Just then the conviction had come back to her voice, stronger than ever, strengthening the tone just when it was breaking. She had never spoken to him in this way. He called her.

"Sylvia! Will you come here, my dear?" She came, and he took her fresh young hands. "What is it? Has anything happened? Are you unhappy? Tell me."

At his question the violet eyes slowly filled, and she just bent her head once or twice, as though assenting.

"You are unhappy?" He repeated his question, and again she nodded sadly.

"But happy, too,--often."

There was not room for happiness and sorrow together in her full eyes. The tear fell, and gladness took its place at his touch. But he looked, and remembered other hands, and began to know the truth. Love's unforgotten spirit came, wafting a breath of older days.

He looked, and wondered whom the girl had chosen, and was glad for her happiness while he grew anxious for its life. She was so young that she must have chosen lately and quickly. In a rush of inward questioning his mind ran back through the long journey they had made together, and answers came in many faces of men that glided before him. One of them stopped him and held his thought, as a fleeting memory will. A young officer of her father's flagship, lean, brown, bright-eyed, with a strong mouth and a rare smile. Sylvia had often talked with him, and the boy's bright eyes

used to watch her from the distance when he was not beside her. Quiet of speech he was, and resolute, bred in the keen air of a northern sea, of the few from among whom fate may choose the one. That was the man.

The colonel spoke, then, as though he had said much, glad and willing to take the girl's conclusion.

"I know who it is," he said, as if all had been explained. "I am glad, very glad."

His hands pressed hers more tightly, for he was a man of heart, and because his own life had failed strangely, he knew how happy she must be, having all he had not. But the violet eyes grew wide and dark and surprised, and the faint colour came and went.

"Do you really, really know at last?" she asked, very low.

"Yes, dear, I know," he said, for he had the sure conviction out of his sympathy for the child.

"And you are glad? Even as I am?"

"Indeed I am! I love you with all my heart, my dear."

She looked at him a moment longer, and then her sight grew faint, and her face hid itself against his coat.

"Say it! Say it again!" she repeated, and her white fingers closed tightly upon his sleeve. "I have waited so long to hear you say it!"

An uneasy and half-distressed look came to his face instantly, as he looked down at the brown hair.

"What?" he asked. "What have you waited to hear me say?"

"That--the words you said just now." Her face still hidden, she hesitated.

"What did I say? That I loved you, my dear?"

She nodded silently, against his coat.

"That I have always loved you, Sylvia dear," he said, while a wondering fear stole through him.

"You never told me. And I did not dare tell you--how could I? But now you understand. You know that the years mean nothing, after all, and that there is still sand in the hourglass, and you and I shall reach the end of the road together--"

"Sylvia!" His voice rang sharply and painfully as he interrupted her.

He was a little pale, and his grey eyes were less steady than usual, for he could not be mistaken any longer. He had faced many dangers bravely, but the girl frightened him, clinging to his sleeve, and talking of her half-childish love for him. Then came the shock to his honour, for it seemed as though it must somehow have been his fault.

She looked up and saw his face, but could not understand it, though she had a prevision of evil, and the stealing sickness of disappointment made her faint.

"I did not know what you meant, my child," he said, growing more pale, and very gently pushing her back a little. "I was thinking of young Knox. I thought you loved him. I was so sure that he was the man."

She drew back, now, of her own will, staring.

"Knox? Mr. Knox?" She repeated the name, hardly hearing her own words, half stunned by her mistake. "But you said--you said you loved me--"

"As your father does," said Colonel Wimpole, very gravely. "Your father and I are just of the same age. We were boys together. You know it, my dear."

She was a mere child, and he made her feel that she was. Her hands covered her face in an instant as she fled, and before the door had closed behind her, the colonel heard the first quick sob.

He had risen to his feet, and stood still, looking at the door. When he was alone, he might have smiled, as some men might have done, not at Sylvia, indeed, though at the absurdity of the situation. But his face was sad, and he quietly sat down again by the table, and began to think of what had happened.

Sylvia was very foolish, he said to himself, as he tried to impose upon his mind what he thought should have been his conviction. Yet he was deeply and truly touched by her half-childish love, and its innocence seemed pathetic to him, while he was hurt for her pain, and most of all for her overwhelming confusion.

At the same time came memories and visions, and his head sank forward a little as he sat in his chair by the table. The vision of hope was growing daily more dim, but the remembrance of the past was as undying as what has been is beyond recall.

Sylvia would wake from her girlish dream, and, in the fulness of young womanhood, would love a man of her own years. The colonel knew that. She would see that he was going in under the gateway of old age, while she was on the threshold of youth's morning. A few days, or a few months, or, at most, a few years more, and she must see that he was an old man. That was certain.

He sighed, not for Sylvia, but because age is that deadly sickness of which hope must perish at last. Time is a prince

of narrow possessions, absolute where he reigns at all, cruel upon his people, and relentless; for, beyond his scanty principality, he is nothing, and his name is not known in the empire of eternity. Therefore while he rules he raises the dark standard of death, taking tribute of life, and giving back a slow poison in return.

Colonel Wimpole was growing old, and, though the woman he still loved was not young, she was far younger than he, and he must soon seem an old man even in her eyes. And then there would not be much hope left. Sadly he wondered what Sylvia saw in him which that other woman, who had known him long, seemed to have never quite seen. But such questioning could find no satisfaction.

He might have remained absorbed in his reflexions for a long time had he been left alone, but the door opened behind him, and he knew by the steady and precise way in which it was opened and shut that his sister had entered the room.

"Richard," she said, "I am surprised." Then she stood still and waited.

Miss Wimpole was older than her brother, and was an exaggeration of him in petticoats. Her genuine admiration for him was curiously tempered by the fact that, when they had been children, she, as the elder, had kept him out of mischief, occasionally by force, often by authority, but never by persuasion. When in pinafores the colonel had been fond of sweets. Miss Wimpole considered that he owed his excellent health to her heroic determination to save him from destruction by jam. Since those days she had been obliged to yield to him on other points, but the memory of

victory in the matter of preserves still made her manner authoritative.

She was very like him, being tall, thin, and not ungraceful, though as oddly precise in her movements and gestures as she was rigid in her beliefs, faithful in her affections, and just in her judgments. She had loved a man who had been killed in the civil war, and, being what she was, she had never so much as considered the possibility of marrying any one else. She was much occupied in good works and did much good, but she was so terribly accurate about it as to make Sylvia say that she was like a public charity that had been brought up in good society.

The colonel rose as she spoke.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "Why are you surprised?"

"What have you been saying to Sylvia, Richard?" enquired Miss Wimpole, not moving.

It would have been hard to hit upon a question more certain to embarrass the colonel. He felt the difficulty of his position so keenly that, old as he was, a faint colour rose in his cheeks. No answer occurred to him, and he hesitated.

"She has locked herself up in her room," continued Miss Wimpole, with searching severity, "and she is crying as though her heart would break. I heard her sobbing as I passed the door, and she would not let me in."

"I am very sorry," said the colonel, gravely.

"You do not seem much concerned," retorted his sister. "I insist upon knowing what is the matter."

"Girls often cry," observed Colonel Wimpole, who felt obliged to say something, though he did not at all know