

The Purple Cloud

M. P. Shiel



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INTRODUCTION

About three months ago—that is to say, toward the end of May of this year of 1900—the writer whose name appears on the title-page received as noteworthy a letter, and packet of papers, as it has been his lot to examine. They came from a very good friend of mine, whose name there is no reason that I should now conceal—Dr. Arthur Lister Browne, M.A. (Oxon.), F.R.C.P. It happened that for two years I had been spending most of my time in France, and as Browne had a Norfolk practice, I had not seen him during my visits to London. Moreover, though our friendship was of the most intimate kind, we were both atrocious correspondents: so that only two notes passed between us during those years.

Till, last May, there reached me the letter—and the packet—to which I refer. The packet consisted of four note-books, quite crowded throughout with those giddy shapes of Pitman's shorthand, whose *ensemble* so resembles startled swarms hovering in flighty poses on the wing. They were scribbled in pencil, with little distinction between thick and thin strokes, few vowels: so that their slow deciphering, I can assure the reader, has been no holiday. The letter also was pencilled in shorthand; and this letter, together with the second of the note-books which I have deciphered (it was marked 'III. '), I now publish.

[I must say, however, that in some five instances there will occur sentences rather crutched by my own guess-work; and in two instances the characters were so impossibly mystical, that I had to abandon the passage with a headache. But all this will be found immaterial to the general narrative.]

The following is Browne's letter:

'DEAR OLD SHIEL,—I have just been lying thinking of you,

and wishing that you were here to give one a last squeeze of the hand before I—" *go* ": for, by all appearance, "going" I am. Four days ago, I began to feel a soreness in the throat, and passing by old Johnson's surgery at Selbridge, went in and asked him to have a look at me. He muttered something about membranous laryngitis which made me smile, but by the time I reached home I was hoarse, and not smiling: before night I had dyspnoca and laryngeal stridor. I at once telegraphed to London for Morgan, and, between him and Johnson, they have been opening my trachea, and burning my inside with chromic acid and the galvanic cautery. The difficulty as to breathing has subsided, and it is wonderful how little I suffer: but I am much too old a hand not to know what's what: the bronchi are involved—*too far* involved—and as a matter of absolute fact, there isn't any hope. Morgan is still, I believe, fondly dwelling upon the possibility of adding me to his successful-tracheotomy statistics, but prognosis was always my strong point, and I say No. The very small consolation of my death will be the beating of a specialist in his own line. So we shall see.

'I have been arranging some of my affairs this morning, and remembered these notebooks. I intended letting you have them months ago, but my habit of putting things off, and the fact that the lady was alive from whom I took down the words, prevented me. Now she is dead, and as a literary man, and a student of life, you should be interested, if you can manage to read them. You may even find them valuable.

'I am under a little morphia at present, propped up in a nice little state of languor, and as I am able to write without much effort, I will tell you in the old Pitman's something about her. Her name was Miss Mary Wilson; she was about thirty when I met her, forty-five when she died, and I knew her intimately all those fifteen years. Do you know anything about the philosophy of the hypnotic trance? Well, that was

the relation between us—hypnotist and subject. She had been under another man before my time, but no one was ever so successful with her as I. She suffered from *tic douloureux* of the fifth nerve. She had had most of her teeth drawn before I saw her, and an attempt had been made to wrench out the nerve on the left side by the external scission. But it made no difference: all the clocks in hell tick-tacked in that poor woman's jaw, and it was the mercy of Providence that ever she came across *me*. My organisation was found to have almost complete, and quite easy, control over hers, and with a few passes I could expel her Legion.

'Well, you never saw anyone so singular in personal appearance as my friend, Miss Wilson. Medicine-man as I am, I could never behold her suddenly without a sensation of shock: she suggested so inevitably what we call "the *other* world," one detecting about her some odour of the worm, with the feeling that here was rather ghost than woman. And yet I can hardly convey to you the why of this, except by dry details as to the contours of her lofty brow, meagre lips, pointed chin, and ashen cheeks. She was tall and deplorably emaciated, her whole skeleton, except the thigh-bones, being quite visible. Her eyes were of the bluish hue of cigarette smoke, and had in them the strangest, feeble, unearthly gaze; while at thirty-five her paltry wisp of hair was quite white.

'She was well-to-do, and lived alone in old Wooding Manor-house, five miles from Ash Thomas. As you know, I was "beginning" in these parts at the time, and soon took up my residence at the manor. She insisted that I should devote myself to her alone; and that one patient constituted the most lucrative practice which I ever had.

'Well, I quickly found that, in the state of trance, Miss Wilson possessed very remarkable powers: remarkable, I mean, not, of course, because peculiar to herself in *kind*, but because they were so constant, reliable, exact, and far-

reaching, in degree. The veriest fledgling in psychical science will now sit and discourse finically to you about the reporting powers of the mind in its trance state—just as though it was something quite new! This simple fact, I assure you, which the Psychical Research Society, only after endless investigation, admits to be scientific, has been perfectly well known to every old crone since the Middle Ages, and, I assume, long previously. What an unnecessary air of discovery! The certainty that someone in trance in Manchester can tell you what is going on in London, or in Pekin, was not, of course, left to the acumen of an office in Fleet Street; and the society, in establishing the fact beyond doubt for the general public, has not gone one step toward explaining it. They have, in fact, revealed nothing that many of us did not, with absolute assurance, know before.

'But talking of poor Miss Wilson, I say that her powers were *remarkable*, because, though not exceptional in *genre*, they were so special in quantity,—so "constant," and "far-reaching." I believe it to be a fact that, *in general*, the powers of trance manifest themselves more particularly with regard to space, as distinct from time: the spirit roams in the present—it travels over a plain—it does not *usually* attract the interest of observers by great ascents, or by great descents. I fancy that is so. But Miss Wilson's gift was special to this extent, that she travelled in every direction, and easily in all but one, north and south, up and down, in the past, the present, and the future.

This I discovered, not at once, but gradually. She would emit a stream of sounds in the trance state—I can hardly call it *speech*, so murmurous, yet guttural, was the utterance, mixed with puffy breath-sounds at the languid lips. This state was accompanied by an intense contraction of the pupils, absence of the knee-jerk, considerable rigor, and a rapt and arrant expression. I got into the habit of sitting long hours at her bed-side, quite fascinated by her,

trying to catch the import of that opiate and visionary language which came puffing and fluttering in deliberate monotone from her lips. Gradually, in the course of months, my ear learned to detect the words; "the veil was rent" for me also; and I was able to follow somewhat the course of her musing and wandering spirit.

At the end of six months I heard her one day repeat some words which were familiar to me. They were these: "Such were the arts by which the Romans extended their conquests, and attained the palm of victory; and the concurring testimony of different authors enables us to describe them with precision..." I was startled: they are part of Gibbon's "Decline and Fall," which I easily guessed that she had never read.

I said in a stern voice: "Where are you?"

She replied, "Us are in a room, eight hundred and eleven miles above. A man is writing. Us are reading."

I may tell you two things: first, that in trance she never spoke of herself as "I," nor even as "we," but, for some unknown reason, in the *objective* way, as " *us* ": "us are," she would say—"us will," "us went"; though, of course, she was an educated lady, and I don't think ever lived in the West of England, where they say "us" in that way; secondly, when wandering in the past, she always represented herself as being " *above* " (the earth?), and higher the further back in time she went; in describing present events she appears to have felt herself *on* (the earth); while, as regards the future, she invariably declared that " *us* " were so many miles "within" (the earth).

To her excursions in this last direction, however, there seemed to exist certain fixed limits: I say seemed, for I cannot be sure, and only mean that, in spite of my efforts, she never, in fact, went far in this direction. Three, four thousand "miles" were common figures on her lips in describing her distance "above"; but her distance "within" never got beyond sixty-three. Usually, she would say

twenty, twenty-five. She appeared, in relation to the future, to resemble a diver in the deep sea, who, the deeper he strives, finds a more resistant pressure, till, at no great depth, resistance becomes prohibition, and he can no further strive.

'I am afraid I can't go on: though I had a good deal to tell you about this lady. During fifteen years, off and on, I sat listening by her dim bed-side to her murmuring trances! At last my expert ear could detect the sense of her faintest sigh. I heard the "Decline and Fall" from beginning to end. Some of her reports were the most frivolous nonsense: over others I have hung in a horror of interest. Certainly, my friend, I have heard some amazing words proceed from those wan lips of Mary Wilson. Sometimes I could hitch her repeatedly to any scene or subject that I chose by the mere exercise of my will; at others, the flighty waywardness of her spirit eluded and baffled me: she resisted—she disobeyed: otherwise I might have sent you, not four note-books, but twenty, or forty. About the fifth year it struck me that it would be well to jot down her more connected utterances, since I knew shorthand.

The note-book marked "I.,"

1

which seems to me the most curious, belongs to the seventh year. Its history, like those of the other three, is this: I heard her one afternoon murmuring in the intonation used when *reading*; the matter interested me; I asked her where she was. She replied: "Us are forty-five miles within: us read, and another writes"; from which I concluded that she was some fifteen to thirty years in the future, perusing an as yet unpublished work. After that, during some weeks, I managed to keep her to the same subject, and finally, I fancy, won pretty well the whole work. I believe you would find it striking, and hope you will be able to read my notes. 'But no more of Mary Wilson now. Rather let us think a

little of A.L. Browne, F.R.C.P!—with a breathing-tube in his trachea, and Eternity under his pillow...' [Dr. Browne's letter then continues on a subject of no interest here.] [The present writer may add that Dr. Browne's prognosis of his own case proved correct, for he passed away two days after writing the above. My transcription of the shorthand book marked 'III.' I now proceed to give without comment, merely reminding the reader that the words form the substance of a book or document to be written, or to be motivated (according to Miss Wilson) in that Future, which, no less than the Past, substantively exists in the Present—though, like the Past, we see it not. I need only add that the title, division into paragraphs, &c., have been arbitrarily contrived by myself for the sake of form and convenience.]¹[This I intend to publish under the title of 'The Last Miracle; 'II.' will bear that of 'The Lord of the Sea'; the present book is marked 'III.' The perusal of 'IV.' I have yet finished, but so far do not consider it suitable for publication.]

(*Here begins the note-book marked 'III.'*)

THE PURPLE CLOUD

Well, the memory seems to be getting rather impaired now, rather weak. What, for instance, was the name of that parson who preached, just before the *Boreal* set out, about the wickedness of any further attempt to reach the North Pole? I have forgotten! Yet four years ago it was familiar to me as my own name.

Things which took place before the voyage seem to be getting a little cloudy in the memory now. I have sat here, in the loggia of this Cornish villa, to write down some sort of account of what has happened—God knows why, since no eye can ever read it—and at the very beginning I cannot remember the parson's name.

He was a strange sort of man surely, a Scotchman from Ayrshire, big and gaunt, with tawny hair. He used to go about London streets in shough and rough-spun clothes, a plaid flung from one shoulder. Once I saw him in Holborn with his rather wild stalk, frowning and muttering to himself. He had no sooner come to London, and opened chapel (I think in Fetter Lane), than the little room began to be crowded; and when, some years afterwards, he moved to a big establishment in Kensington, all sorts of men, even from America and Australia, flocked to hear the thunderstorms that he talked, though certainly it was not an age apt to fly into enthusiasms over that species of pulpit prophets and prophecies. But this particular man undoubtedly did wake the strong dark feelings that sleep in the heart; his eyes were very singular and powerful; his voice from a whisper ran gathering, like snow-balls, and crashed, as I have heard the pack-ice in commotion far yonder in the North; while his gestures were as uncouth and gawky as some wild man's of the primitive ages.

Well, this man—what was his name?—Macintosh? Mackay?

I think—yes, that was it! *Mackay*. Mackay saw fit to take offence at the new attempt to reach the Pole in the *Boreal*; and for three Sundays, when the preparations were nearing completion, stormed against it at Kensington.

The excitement of the world with regard to the North Pole had at this date reached a pitch which can only be described as *fevered*, though that word hardly expresses the strange ecstasy and unrest which prevailed: for the abstract interest which mankind, in mere desire for knowledge, had always felt in this unknown region, was now, suddenly, a thousand and a thousand times intensified by a new, concrete interest—a tremendous *money* interest. And the new zeal had ceased to be healthy in its tone as the old zeal was: for now the fierce demon Mammon was making his voice heard in this matter.

Within the ten years preceding the *Boreal* expedition, no less than twenty-seven expeditions had set out, and failed. The secret of this new rage lay in the last will and testament of Mr. Charles P. Stickney of Chicago, that king of faddists, supposed to be the richest individual who ever lived: he, just ten years before the *Boreal* undertaking, had died, bequeathing 175 million dollars to the man, of whatever nationality, who first reached the Pole.

Such was the actual wording of the will— '*the man who first reached*': and from this loose method of designating the person intended had immediately burst forth a prolonged heat of controversy in Europe and America as to whether or no the testator meant *the Chief* of the first expedition which reached: but it was finally decided, on the highest legal authority, that, in any case, the actual wording of the document held good: and that it was the individual, whatever his station in the expedition, whose foot first reached the 90th degree of north latitude, who would have title to the fortune.

At all events, the public ferment had risen, as I say, to a pitch of positive fever; and as to the *Boreal* in particular,

the daily progress of her preparations was minutely discussed in the newspapers, everyone was an authority on her fitting, and she was in every mouth a bet, a hope, a jest, or a sneer: for now, at last, it was felt that success was probable. So this Mackay had an acutely interested audience, if a somewhat startled, and a somewhat cynical, one.

A truly lion-hearted man this must have been, after all, to dare proclaim a point-of-view so at variance with the spirit of his age! One against four hundred millions, they bent one way, he the opposite, saying that they were wrong, all wrong! People used to call him 'John the Baptist Redivivus': and without doubt he did suggest something of that sort. I suppose that at the time when he had the face to denounce the *Boreal* there was not a sovereign on any throne in Europe who, but for shame, would have been glad of a subordinate post on board.

On the third Sunday night of his denunciation I was there in that Kensington chapel, and I heard him. And the wild talk he talked! He seemed like a man delirious with inspiration.

The people sat quite spell-bound, while Mackay's prophesying voice ranged up and down through all the modulations of thunder, from the hurrying mutter to the reverberant shock and climax: and those who came to scoff remained to wonder.

Put simply, what he said was this: That there was undoubtedly some sort of Fate, or Doom, connected with the Poles of the earth in reference to the human race: that man's continued failure, in spite of continual efforts, to reach them, abundantly and super-abundantly proved this; and that this failure constituted a lesson— *and a warning* — which the race disregarded at its peril.

The North Pole, he said, was not so very far away, and the difficulties in the way of reaching it were not, on the face of them, so very great: human ingenuity had achieved a

thousand things a thousand times more difficult; yet in spite of over half-a-dozen well-planned efforts in the nineteenth century, and thirty-one in the twentieth, man had never reached: always he had been baulked, baulked, by some seeming chance—some restraining Hand: and herein lay the lesson— *herein the warning* . Wonderfully—really *wonderfully* —like the Tree of Knowledge in Eden, he said, was that Pole: all the rest of earth lying open and offered to man—but *That* persistently veiled and 'forbidden.' It was as when a father lays a hand upon his son, with: 'Not here, my child; wheresoever you will—but not here.'

But human beings, he said, were free agents, with power to stop their ears, and turn a callous consciousness to the whispers and warning indications of Heaven; and he believed, he said, that the time was now come when man would find it absolutely in his power to stand on that 90th of latitude, and plant an impious right foot on the head of the earth—just as it had been given into the absolute power of Adam to stretch an impious right hand, and pluck of the Fruit of Knowledge; but, said he—his voice pealing now into one long proclamation of awful augury—just as the abuse of that power had been followed in the one case by catastrophe swift and universal, so, in the other, he warned the entire race to look out thenceforth for nothing from God but a lowering sky, and thundery weather.

The man's frantic earnestness, authoritative voice, and savage gestures, could not but have their effect upon all; as for me, I declare, I sat as though a messenger from Heaven addressed me. But I believe that I had not yet reached home, when the whole impression of the discourse had passed from me like water from a duck's back. The Prophet in the twentieth century was not a success. John Baptist himself, camel-skin and all, would, have met with only tolerant shrugs. I dismissed Mackay from my mind with the thought: 'He is behind his age, I suppose.'

But haven't I thought differently of Mackay since, my God...?

Three weeks—it was about that—before that Sunday night discourse, I was visited by Clark, the chief of the coming expedition—a mere visit of friendship. I had then been established about a year at No. II, Harley Street, and, though under twenty-five, had, I suppose, as *élite* a practice as any doctor in Europe.

Élite—but small. I was able to maintain my state, and move among the great: but now and again I would feel the secret pinch of moneylessness. Just about that time, in fact, I was only saved from considerable embarrassment by the success of my book, 'Applications of Science to the Arts.' In the course of conversation that afternoon, Clark said to me in his light hap-hazard way:

'Do you know what I dreamed about you last night, Adam Jeffson? I dreamed that you were with us on the expedition.'

I think he must have seen my start: on the same night I had myself dreamed the same thing; but not a word said I about it now. There was a stammer in my tongue when I answered:

'Who? I?—on the expedition?—I would not go, if I were asked.'

'Oh, you would.'

'I wouldn't. You forget that I am about to be married.'

'Well, we need not discuss the point, as Peters is not going to die,' said he. 'Still, if anything did happen to him, you know, it is you I should come straight to, Adam Jeffson.'

'Clark, you jest,' I said: 'I know really very little of astronomy, or magnetic phenomena. Besides, I am about to be married....'

'But what about your botany, my friend? *There's* what we

should be wanting from you: and as for nautical astronomy, poh, a man with your scientific habit would pick all that up in no time.'

'You discuss the matter as gravely as though it were a possibility, Clark,' I said, smiling. 'Such a thought would never enter my head: there is, first of all, my *fiancée* ——'

'Ah, the all-important Countess, eh?—Well, but she, as far as I know the lady, would be the first to force you to go. The chance of stamping one's foot on the North Pole does not occur to a man every day, my son.'

'Do talk of something else!' I said. 'There is Peters....'

'Well, of course, there is Peters. But believe me, the dream I had was so clear——'

'Let me alone with your dreams, and your Poles!' I laughed. Yes, I remember: I pretended to laugh loud! But my secret heart knew, even *then*, that one of those crises was occurring in my life which, from my youth, has made it the most extraordinary which any creature of earth ever lived. And I knew that this was so, firstly, because of the two dreams, and secondly, because, when Clark was gone, and I was drawing on my gloves to go to see my *fiancée*, I heard distinctly the old two Voices talk within me: and One said: 'Go not to see her now!' and the Other: 'Yes, go, go!'

The two Voices of my life! An ordinary person reading my words would undoubtedly imagine that I mean only two ordinary contradictory impulses—or else that I rave: for what modern man could comprehend how real-seeming were those voices, how loud, and how, ever and again, I heard them contend within me, with a nearness 'nearer than breathing,' as it says in the poem, and 'closer than hands and feet.'

About the age of seven it happened first to me. I was playing one summer evening in a pine-wood of my father's; half a mile away was a quarry-cliff; and as I played, it suddenly seemed as if someone said to me, inside of me: 'Just take a walk toward the cliff'; and as if someone else

said: 'Don't go that way at all'—mere whispers then, which gradually, as I grew up, seemed to swell into cries of wrathful contention! I did go toward the cliff: it was steep, thirty feet high, and I fell. Some weeks later, on recovering speech, I told my astonished mother that 'someone had pushed me' over the edge, and that someone else 'had caught me' at the bottom!

One night, soon after my eleventh birthday, lying in bed, the thought struck me that my life must be of great importance to some thing or things which I could not see; that two Powers, which hated each other, must be continually after me, one wishing for some reason to kill me, and the other for some reason to keep me alive, one wishing me to do so and so, and the other to do the opposite; that I was not a boy like other boys, but a creature separate, special, marked for—something. Already I had notions, touches of mood, passing instincts, as occult and primitive, I verily believe, as those of the first man that stepped; so that such Biblical expressions as 'The Lord spake to So-and-so, saying' have hardly ever suggested any question in my mind as to how the Voice was heard: I did not find it so very difficult to comprehend that originally man had more ears than two; nor should have been surprised to know that I, in these latter days, more or less resembled those primeval ones.

But not a creature, except perhaps my mother, has ever dreamed me what I here state that I was. I seemed the ordinary youth of my time, bow in my 'Varsity eight, cramming for exams., dawdling in clubs. When I had to decide as to a profession, who could have suspected the conflict that transacted itself in my soul, while my brain was indifferent to the matter—that agony of strife with which the brawling voices shouted, the one: 'Be a scientist—a doctor,' and the other: 'Be a lawyer, an engineer, an artist—be *anything* but a doctor!'

A doctor I became, and went to what had grown into the

greatest of medical schools—Cambridge; and there it was that I came across a man, named Scotland, who had a rather odd view of the world. He had rooms, I remember, in the New Court at Trinity, and a set of us were generally there. He was always talking about certain 'Black' and 'White Powers, till it became absurd, and the men used to call him 'black-and-white-mystery-man,' because, one day, when someone said something about 'the black mystery of the universe,' Scotland interrupted him with the words: 'the black-and-white mystery.'

Quite well I remember Scotland now—the sweetest, gentle soul he was, with a passion for cats, and Sappho, and the Anthology, very short in stature, with a Roman nose, continually making the effort to keep his neck straight, and draw his paunch in. He used to say that the universe was being frantically contended for by two Powers: a White and a Black; that the White was the stronger, but did not find the conditions on our particular planet very favourable to his success; that he had got the best of it up to the Middle Ages in Europe, but since then had been slowly and stubbornly giving way before the Black; and that finally the Black would win—not everywhere perhaps, but *here*—and would carry off, if no other earth, at least *this* one, for his prize.

This was Scotland's doctrine, which he never tired of repeating; and while others heard him with mere toleration, little could they divine with what agony of inward interest, I, cynically smiling there, drank in his words. Most profound, most profound, was the impression they made upon me.

But I was saying that when Clark left me, I was drawing on my gloves to go to see my *fiancée*, the Countess Clodagh, when I heard the two voices most clearly.

Sometimes the urgency of one or other impulse is so overpowering, that there is no resisting it: and it was so then with the one that bid me go.

I had to traverse the distance between Harley Street and Hanover Square, and all the time it was as though something shouted at my physical ear: 'Since you go, breathe no word of the *Boreal*, and Clark's visit'; and another shout: 'Tell, tell, hide nothing!'

It seemed to last a month: yet it was only some minutes before I was in Hanover Square, and Clodagh in my arms. She was, in my opinion, the most superb of creatures, Clodagh—that haughty neck which seemed always scorning something just behind her left shoulder. Superb! but ah—I know it now—a godless woman, Clodagh, a bitter heart.

Clodagh once confessed to me that her favourite character in history was Lucrezia Borgia, and when she saw my horror, immediately added: 'Well, no, I am only joking!'

Such was her duplicity: for I see now that she lived in the constant effort to hide her heinous heart from me. Yet, now I think of it, how completely did Clodagh enthrall me!

Our proposed marriage was opposed by both my family and hers: by mine, because her father and grandfather had died in lunatic asylums; and by hers, because, forsooth, I was neither a rich nor a noble match. A sister of hers, much older than herself, had married a common country doctor, Peters of Taunton, and this so-called *mésalliance* made the so-called *mésalliance* with me doubly detestable in the eyes of her relatives. But Clodagh's extraordinary passion for me was to be stemmed neither by their threats nor prayers.

What a flame, after all, was Clodagh! Sometimes she frightened me.

She was at this date no longer young, being by five years my senior, as also, by five years, the senior of her nephew, born from the marriage of her sister with Peters of Taunton. This nephew was Peter Peters, who was to accompany the *Boreal* expedition as doctor, botanist, and

meteorological assistant.

On that day of Clark's visit to me I had not been seated five minutes with Clodagh, when I said:

'Dr. Clark—ha! ha! ha!—has been talking to me about the Expedition. He says that if anything happened to Peters, I should be the first man he would run to. He has had an absurd dream...'

The consciousness that filled me as I uttered these words was the *wickedness* of me—the crooked wickedness. But I could no more help it than I could fly.

Clodagh was standing at a window holding a rose at her face. For quite a minute she made no reply. I saw her sharp-cut, florid face in profile, steadily bent and smelling. She said presently in her cold, rapid way:

'The man who first plants his foot on the North Pole will certainly be ennobled. I say nothing of the many millions... I only wish that I was a man!'

'I don't know that I have any special ambition that way,' I rejoined. 'I am very happy in my warm Eden with my Clodagh. I don't like the outer Cold.'

'Don't let me think little of you!' she answered pettishly.

'Why should you, Clodagh? I am not bound to desire to go to the North Pole, am I?'

'But you *would* go, I suppose, if you could?'

'I might—I—doubt it. There is our marriage....'

'Marriage indeed! It is the one thing to transform our marriage from a sneaking difficulty to a ten times triumphant event.'

'You mean if *I* personally were the first to stand at the Pole. But there are many in an expedition. It is very unlikely that *I*, personally—'

'For *me* you will, Adam—' she began.

'"*Will*," Clodagh?' I cried. 'You say "*will*"? there is not even the slightest shadow of a probability—!'

'But why? There are still three weeks before the start. They say...'

She stopped, she stopped.

'They say what?'

Her voice dropped:

'That Peter takes atropine.'

Ah, I started then. She moved from the window, sat in a rocking-chair, and turned the leaves of a book, without reading. We were silent, she and I; I standing, looking at her, she drawing the thumb across the leaf-edges, and beginning again, contemplatively. Then she laughed dryly a little—a dry, mad laugh.

'Why did you start when I said that?' she asked, reading now at random.

'I! I did not start, Clodagh! What made you think that I started? I did not start! Who told you, Clodagh, that Peters takes atropine?'

'He is my nephew: I should know. But don't look dumbfounded in that absurd fashion: I have no intention of poisoning him in order to see you a multimillionaire, and a Peer of the Realm....'

'My dearest Clodagh!'

'I easily might, however. He will be here presently. He is bringing Mr. Wilson for the evening.' (Wilson was going as electrician of the expedition.)

'Clodagh.' I said, 'believe me, you jest in a manner which does not please me.'

'Do I really?' she answered with that haughty, stiff half-turn of her throat: 'then I must be more exquisite. But, thank Heaven, it is only a jest. Women are no longer admired for doing such things.'

'Ha! ha! ha!—no—no longer admired, Clodagh! Oh, my good Lord! let us change this talk....'

But now she could talk of nothing else. She got from me that afternoon the history of all the Polar expeditions of late years, how far they reached, by what aids, and why they failed. Her eyes shone; she listened eagerly. Before this time, indeed, she had been interested in the *Boreal*, knew

the details of her outfitting, and was acquainted with several members of the expedition. But now, suddenly, her mind seemed wholly possessed, my mention of Clark's visit apparently setting her well a-burn with the Pole-fever. The passion of her kiss as I tore myself from her embrace that day I shall not forget. I went home with a pretty heavy heart.

The house of Dr. Peter Peters was three doors from mine, on the opposite side of the street. Toward one that night, his footman ran to knock me up with the news that Peters was very ill. I hurried to his bed-side, and knew by the first glance at his deliriums and his staring pupils that he was poisoned with atropine. Wilson, the electrician, who had passed the evening with him at Clodagh's in Hanover Square, was there.

'What on earth is the matter?' he said to me.

'Poisoned,' I answered.

'Good God! what with?'

'Atropine.'

'Good Heavens!'

'Don't be frightened: I think he will recover.'

'Is that certain?'

'Yes, I think—that is, if he leaves off taking the drug, Wilson.'

'What! it is he who has poisoned himself?'

I hesitated, I hesitated. But I said:

'He is in the habit of taking atropine, Wilson.'

Three hours I remained there, and, God knows, toiled hard for his life: and when I left him in the dark of the fore-day, my mind was at rest: he would recover.

I slept till 11 A.M., and then hurried over again to Peters.

In the room were my two nurses, and Clodagh.

My beloved put her forefinger to her lips, whispering:

'Sh-h-h! he is asleep....'

She came closer to my ear, saying:

'I heard the news early. I am come to stay with him, till—'

the last....'

We looked at each other some time—eye to eye, steadily, she and I: but mine dropped before Clodagh's. A word was on my mouth to say, but I said nothing.

The recovery of Peters was not so steady as I had expected. At the end of the first week he was still prostrate. It was then that I said to Clodagh:

'Clodagh, your presence at the bed-side here somehow does not please me. It is so unnecessary.'

'Unnecessary certainly,' she replied: 'but I always had a genius for nursing, and a passion for watching the battles of the body. Since no one objects, why should you?'

'Ah!... I don't know. This is a case that I dislike. I have half a mind to throw it to the devil.'

'Then do so.'

'And you, too—go home, go home, Clodagh!'

'But *why*?—if one does no harm. In these days of "the corruption of the upper classes," and Roman decadence of everything, shouldn't every innocent whim be encouraged by you upright ones who strive against the tide? Whims are the brakes of crimes: and this is mine. I find a sensuous pleasure, almost a sensual, in dabbling in delicate drugs—like Helen, for that matter, and Medea, and Calypso, and the great antique women, who were all excellent chymists. To study the human ship in a gale, and the slow drama of its foundering—isn't that a quite thrilling distraction? And I want you to get into the habit at once of letting me have my little way——'

Now she touched my hair with a lofty playfulness that soothed me: but even then I looked upon the rumpled bed, and saw that the man there was really very sick.

I have still a nausea to write about it! Lucrezia Borgia in her own age may have been heroic: but Lucrezia in this late century! One could retch up the heart...

The man grew sick on that bed, I say. The second week passed, and only ten days remained before the start of the

expedition.

At the end of that second week, Wilson, the electrician, was one evening sitting by Peter's bedside when I entered.

At the moment, Clodagh was about to administer a dose to Peters; but seeing me, she put down the medicine-glass on the night table, and came toward me; and as she came, I saw a sight which stabbed me: for Wilson took up the deposited medicine-glass, elevated it, looked at it, smelled into it: and he did it with a kind of hurried, light-fingered stealth; and he did it with an under-look, and a meaningfulness of expression which, I thought, proved mistrust....

Meantime, Clark came each day. He had himself a medical degree, and about this time I called him in professionally, together with Alleyne of Cavendish Square, to consultation over Peters. The patient lay in a semi-coma broken by passionate vomitings, and his condition puzzled us all. I formally stated that he took atropine—had been originally poisoned by atropine: but we saw that his present symptoms were not atropine symptoms, but, it almost seemed, of some other vegetable poison, which we could not precisely name.

'Mysterious thing,' said Clark to me, when we were alone.

'I don't understand it,' I said.

'Who are the two nurses?'

'Oh, highly recommended people of my own.'

'At any rate, my dream about you comes true, Jeffson. It is clear that Peters is out of the running now.'

I shrugged.

'I now formally invite you to join the expedition,' said Clark: 'do you consent?'

I shrugged again.

'Well, if that means consent,' he said, 'let me remind you that you have only eight days, and all the world to do in them.'

This conversation occurred in the dining-room of Peters'

house: and as we passed through the door, I saw Clodagh gliding down the passage outside—rapidly—away from us. Not a word I said to her that day about Clark's invitation. Yet I asked myself repeatedly: Did she not know of it? Had she not *listened* , and heard?

However that was, about midnight, to my great surprise, Peters opened his eyes, and smiled. By noon the next day, his fine vitality, which so fitted him for an Arctic expedition, had re-asserted itself. He was then leaning on an elbow, talking to Wilson, and except his pallor, and strong stomach-pains, there was now hardly a trace of his late approach to death. For the pains I prescribed some quarter-grain tablets of sulphate of morphia, and went away.

Now, David Wilson and I never greatly loved each other, and that very day he brought about a painful situation as between Peters and me, by telling Peters that I had taken his place in the expedition. Peters, a touchy fellow, at once dictated a letter of protest to Clark; and Clark sent Peters' letter to me, marked with a big note of interrogation in blue pencil.

Now, all Peters' preparations were made, mine not; and he had six days in which to recover himself. I therefore wrote to Clark, saying that the changed circumstances of course annulled my acceptance of his offer, though I had already incurred the inconvenience of negotiating with a *locum tenens* .

This decided it: Peters was to go, I stay. The fifth day before the departure dawned. It was a Friday, the 15th June.

Peters was now in an arm-chair. He was cheerful, but with a fevered pulse, and still the stomach-pains. I was giving him three quarter-grains of morphia a day. That Friday night, at 11 P.M., I visited him, and found Clodagh there, talking to him. Peters was smoking a cigar.

'Ah,' Clodagh said, 'I was waiting for you, Adam. I didn't know whether I was to inject anything to-night. Is it Yes or

No?'

'What do you think, Peters?' I said: 'any more pains?'

'Well, perhaps you had better give us another quarter,' he answered: 'there's still some trouble in the tummy off and on.'

'A quarter-grain, then, Clodagh,' I said.

As she opened the syringe-box, she remarked with a pout:

'Our patient has been naughty! He has taken some more atropine.'

I became angry at once.

'Peters,' I cried, 'you know you have no right to be doing things like that without consulting me! Do that once more, and I swear I have nothing further to do with you!'

'Rubbish,' said Peters: 'why all this unnecessary heat? It was a mere flea-bite. I felt that I needed it.'

'He injected it with his own hand...' remarked Clodagh.

She was now standing at the mantel-piece, having lifted the syringe-box from the night-table, taken from its velvet lining both the syringe and the vial containing the morphia tablets, and gone to the mantel-piece to melt one of the tablets in a little of the distilled water there. Her back was turned upon us, and she was a long time. I was standing; Peters in his arm-chair, smoking. Clodagh then began to talk about a Charity Bazaar which she had visited that afternoon.

She was long, she was long. The crazy thought passed through some dim region of my soul: 'Why is she so *long* ?'

'Ah, that was a pain!' went Peters: 'never mind the bazaar, aunt—think of the morphia.'

Suddenly an irresistible impulse seized me—to rush upon her, to dash syringe, tabloids, glass, and all, from her hands. I *must* have obeyed it—I was on the tip-top point of obeying—my body already leant prone: but at that instant a voice at the opened door behind me said:

'Well, how is everything?'

It was Wilson, the electrician, who stood there. With

lightning swiftness I remembered an under-look of mistrust which I had once seen on his face. Oh, well, I would not, and could not!—she was my love—I stood like marble... Clodagh went to meet Wilson with frank right hand, in the left being the fragile glass containing the injection. My eyes were fastened on her face: it was full of reassurance, of free innocence. I said to myself: 'I must surely be mad!' An ordinary chat began, while Clodagh turned up Peters' sleeve, and, kneeling there, injected his fore-arm. As she rose, laughing at something said by Wilson, the drug-glass dropped from her hand, and her heel, by an apparent accident, trod on it. She put the syringe among a number of others on the mantel-piece.

'Your friend has been naughty, Mr. Wilson,' she said again with that same pout: 'he has been taking more atropine.'

'Not really?' said Wilson.

'Let me alone, the whole of you,' answered Peters: 'I ain't a child.'

These were the last intelligible words he ever spoke. He died shortly before 1 A.M. He had been poisoned by a powerful dose of atropine.

From that moment to the moment when the *Boreal* bore me down the Thames, all the world was a mere tumbling nightmare to me, of which hardly any detail remains in my memory. Only I remember the inquest, and how I was called upon to prove that Peters had himself injected himself with atropine. This was corroborated by Wilson, and by Clodagh: and the verdict was in accordance. And in all that chaotic hurry of preparation, three other things only, but those with clear distinctness now, I remember.

The first—and chief—is that tempest of words which I heard at Kensington from that big-mouthed Mackay on the Sunday night. What was it that led me, busy as I was, to that chapel that night? Well, perhaps I know.

There I sat, and heard him: and most strangely have those

words of his peroration planted themselves in my brain, when, rising to a passion of prophecy, he shouted: 'And as in the one case, transgression was followed by catastrophe swift and universal, so, in the other, I warn the entire race to look out thenceforth for nothing from God but a lowering sky, and thundery weather.'

And this second thing I remember: that on reaching home, I walked into my disordered library (for I had had to hunt out some books), where I met my housekeeper in the act of rearranging things. She had apparently lifted an old Bible by the front cover to fling it on the table, for as I threw myself into a chair my eye fell upon the open print near the beginning. The print was very large, and a shaded lamp cast a light upon it. I had been hearing Mackay's wild comparison of the Pole with the tree of Eden, and that no doubt was the reason why such a start convulsed me: for my listless eyes had chanced to rest upon some words.

'The woman gave me of the tree, and I did eat....'

And a third thing I remember in all that turmoil of doubt and flurry: that as the ship moved down with the afternoon tide a telegram was put into my hand; it was a last word from Clodagh; and she said only this:

'Be first—for Me.'

The *Boreal* left St. Katherine's Docks in beautiful weather on the afternoon of the 19th June, full of good hope, bound for the Pole.

All about the docks was one region of heads stretched far in innumerable vagueness, and down the river to Woolwich a continuous dull roar and murmur of bees droned from both banks to cheer our departure.

The expedition was partly a national affair, subvented by Government: and if ever ship was well-found it was the *Boreal*. She had a frame tougher far than any battle-ship's,

capable of ramming some ten yards of drift-ice; and she was stuffed with sufficient pemmican, codroe, fish-meal, and so on, to last us not less than six years.

We were seventeen, all told, the five Heads (so to speak) of the undertaking being Clark (our Chief), John Mew (commander), Aubrey Maitland (meteorologist), Wilson (electrician), and myself (doctor, botanist, and assistant meteorologist).

The idea was to get as far east as the 100°, or the 120°, of longitude; to catch there the northern current; to push and drift our way northward; and when the ship could no further penetrate, to leave her (either three, or else four, of us, on ski), and with sledges drawn by dogs and reindeer make a dash for the Pole.

This had also been the plan of the last expedition—that of the *Nix*—and of several others. The *Boreal* only differed from the *Nix*, and others, in that she was a thing of nicer design, and of more exquisite forethought.

Our voyage was without incident up to the end of July, when we encountered a drift of ice-floes. On the 1st August we were at Kabarova, where we met our coal-ship, and took in a little coal for emergency, liquid air being our proper motor; also forty-three dogs, four reindeer, and a quantity of reindeer-moss; and two days later we turned our bows finally northward and eastward, passing through heavy 'slack' ice under sail and liquid air in crisp weather, till, on the 27th August, we lay moored to a floe off the desolate island of Taimur.

The first thing which we saw here was a bear on the shore, watching for young white-fish: and promptly Clark, Mew, and Lamburn (engineer) went on shore in the launch, I and Maitland following in the pram, each party with three dogs. It was while climbing away inland that Maitland said to me: 'When Clark leaves the ship for the dash to the Pole, it is three, not two, of us, after all, that he is going to take with him, making a party of four.'

I : 'Is that so? Who knows?'

Maitland : 'Wilson does. Clark has let it out in conversation with Wilson.'

I : 'Well, the more the merrier. Who will be the three?'

Maitland : 'Wilson is sure to be in it, and there may be Mew, making the third. As to the fourth, I suppose *I* shall get left out in the cold.'

I : 'More likely I.'

Maitland : 'Well, the race is between us four: Wilson, Mew, you and I. It is a question of physical fitness combined with special knowledge. You are too lucky a dog to get left out, Jeffson.'

I : 'Well, what does it matter, so long as the expedition as a whole is successful? That is the main thing.'

Maitland : 'Oh yes, that's all very fine talk, Jeffson! But is it quite sincere? Isn't it rather a pose to affect to despise \$175,000,000? *I* want to be in at the death, and I mean to be, if I can. We are all more or less self-interested.'

'Look,' I whispered—'a bear.'

It was a mother and cub: and with determined trudge she came wagging her low head, having no doubt smelled the dogs. We separated on the instant, doubling different ways behind ice-boulders, wanting her to go on nearer the shore, before killing; but, passing close, she spied, and bore down at a trot upon me. I fired into her neck, and at once, with a roar, she turned tail, making now straight in Maitland's direction. I saw him run out from cover some hundred yards away, aiming his long-gun: but no report followed: and in half a minute he was under her fore-paws, she striking out slaps at the barking, shrinking dogs. Maitland roared for my help: and at that moment, I, poor wretch, in far worse plight than he, stood shivering in ague: for suddenly one of those wrangles of the voices of my destiny was filling my bosom with loud commotion, one urging me to fly to Maitland's aid, one passionately commanding me be still. But it lasted, I believe, some seconds only: I ran