

JOHN MEADE FALKNER

THE LOST STRADIVARIUS

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The Lost Stradivarius

THE AUTHOR

John Meade Falkner was a remarkable character, as he was not only a scholar and a writer, but a captain of industry as well. Born in 1858, the son of a clergyman in Wiltshire, he was educated at Marlborough and Hertford College, Oxford. On leaving the university, he became tutor to the sons of Sir Andrew Noble, then vice-chairman of the Armstrong-Whitworth Company; and his ability so much impressed his employer that in 1885 he was offered a post in the firm. Without connections or influence in industrial circles, and solely by his intellect, he rose to be a director in 1901, and finally, in 1915, chairman of this enormous business. He was actually chairman during the important years 1915-1920, and remained a director until 1926.

His intellectual energy was so great that throughout his life he found time for scholarship as well as business. He travelled for his firm in Europe and South America; and in the intervals of negotiating with foreign governments studied manuscripts wherever he found a library. His researches in the Vatican Library were of special importance, and in connection with them he received a gold medal from the Pope; he was also decorated by the Italian, Turkish and Japanese governments.

His scholastic interests included archæology, folklore, palæography, mediæval history, architecture and church music; and he was a collector of missals. Towards the end of his life he was made an Honorary Fellow of Hertford College, Oxford, Honorary Reader in Palæography to Durham University, and Honorary Librarian to the Chapter Library of Durham Cathedral, which he left one of the best cathedral libraries in Europe. He died at Durham in 1932.

Apart from *The Lost Stradivarius*, Falkner was the author of two other novels, *The Nebuly Coat* (1903—also published in Penguin Books) and *Moonfleet* (1898). He also wrote a History of Oxfordshire, handbooks to that county and to Berkshire, historical short stories, and some mediævalist verse.

Letter from MISS SOPHIA MALTRAVERS to her Nephew, SIR EDWARD MALTRAVERS, then a Student at Christ Church, Oxford.

13 Pauncefort Buildings, Bath, Oct. 21, 1867.

MY DEAR EDWARD,

It was your late father's dying request that certain events which occurred in his last years should be communicated to you on your coming of age. I have reduced them to writing, partly from my own recollection, which is, alas! still too vivid, and partly with the aid of notes taken at the time of my brother's death. As you are now of full age, I submit the narrative to you. Much of it has necessarily been exceedingly painful to me to write, but at the same time I feel it is better that you should hear the truth from me than garbled stories from others who did not love your father as I did.

Your loving Aunt,

SOPHIA MALTRAVERS

To Sir Edward Maltravers, Bart.

"A tale out of season is as music in mourning."

—ECCLESIASTICUS xxii. 6.

MISS SOPHIA MALTRAVERS' STORY

CHAPTER I

Your father, John Maltravers, was born in 1820 at Worth, and succeeded his father and mine, who died when we were still young children. John was sent to Eton in due course, and in 1839, when he was nineteen years of age, it was determined that he should go to Oxford. It was intended at first to enter him at Christ Church; but Dr. Sarsdell, who visited us at Worth in the summer of 1839, persuaded Mr. Thoresby, our guardian, to send him instead to Magdalen Hall. Dr. Sarsdell was himself Principal of that institution, and represented that John, who then exhibited some symptoms of delicacy, would meet with more personal attention under his care than he could hope to do in so large a college as Christ Church. Mr. Thoresby, ever solicitous for his ward's welfare, readily waived other considerations in favour of an arrangement which he considered conducive to John's health, and he was accordingly matriculated at Magdalen Hall in the autumn of 1839.

Dr. Sarsdell had not been unmindful of his promise to look after my brother, and had secured him an excellent first-floor sitting-room, with a bedroom adjoining, having an aspect towards New College Lane.

I shall pass over the first two years of my brother's residence at Oxford, because they have nothing to do with the present story. They were spent, no doubt, in the ordinary routine of work and recreation common in Oxford at that period.

From his earliest boyhood he had been passionately devoted to music, and had attained a considerable proficiency on the violin. In the autumn term of 1841 he made the acquaintance of Mr. William Gaskell, a very talented student at New College, and also a more than tolerable musician. The practice of music was then very much less common at Oxford than it has since become, and there were none of those societies existing which now do so much to promote its study among undergraduates. It was therefore a cause of much gratification to the two young men, and it afterwards became a strong bond of friendship, to discover that one was as devoted to the pianoforte as was the other to the violin. Mr. Gaskell, though in easy circumstances, had not a pianoforte in his rooms, and was pleased to use a fine instrument by D'Almaine that John had that term received as a birthday present from his guardian.

From that time the two students were thrown much together, and in the autumn term of 1841 and Easter term of 1842 practised a variety of music in John's rooms, he taking the violin part and Mr. Gaskell that for the pianoforte.

It was, I think, in March 1842 that John purchased for his rooms a piece of furniture which was destined afterwards to play no unimportant part in the story I am narrating. This was a very large and low wicker chair of a form then coming into fashion in Oxford, and since, I am told, become a familiar object of most college rooms. It was cushioned with a gaudy pattern of chintz, and bought for new of an upholsterer at the bottom of the High Street.

Mr. Gaskell was taken by his uncle to spend Easter in Rome, and obtaining special leave from his college to prolong his travels; did not return to Oxford till three weeks of the summer term were passed and May was well advanced. So impatient was he to see his friend that he would not let even the first evening of his return pass without coming round to John's rooms. The two young men sat without lights until the night was late; and Mr. Gaskell had much to narrate of his travels, and spoke specially of the beautiful music which he had heard at Easter in the Roman churches. He had also had lessons on the piano from a celebrated professor of the Italian style, but seemed to have been particularly delighted with the music of the seventeenth-century composers, of whose works he had brought back some specimens set for piano and violin.

It was past eleven o'clock when Mr. Gaskell left to return to New College; but the night was unusually warm, with a moon near the full, and John sat for some time in a cushioned window-seat before the open sash thinking over what he had heard about the music of Italy. Feeling still disinclined for sleep, he lit a single candle and began to turn over some of the musical works which Mr. Gaskell had left on the table. His attention was especially attracted to an oblong book, bound in soiled vellum, with a coat of arms stamped in gilt upon the side. It was a manuscript copy of some early suites by Graziani for violin and harpsichord, and was apparently written at Naples in the year 1744, many years after the death of that composer. Though the ink was yellow and faded, the transcript had been accurately made, and could be read with tolerable comfort by an advanced musician in spite of the antiquated notation.

Perhaps by accident, or perhaps by some mysterious direction which our minds are incapable of appreciating, his eye was arrested by a suite of four movements with a *basso continuo*, or figured bass, for the harpsichord. The other suites in the book were only distinguished by numbers, but this one the composer had dignified with the name of "l'Areopagita." Almost mechanically John put the book on his music-stand, took his violin from its case, and after a moment's tuning stood up and played the first movement, a lively *Coranto*. The light of the single candle burning on the table was scarcely sufficient to illumine the page; the shadows hung in the creases of the leaves, which had grown into those wavy folds sometimes observable in books made of thick paper and remaining long shut; and it was with difficulty that he could read what he was playing. But he felt the strange impulse of the old-world music urging him forward, and did not even pause to light the candles which stood ready in their sconces on either side of the desk. The *Coranto* was followed by a *Sarabanda*, and the *Sarabanda* by a *Gagliarda*. My brother stood playing, with his face turned to the window, with the room and the large wicker chair of which I have spoken behind him. The *Gagliarda* began with a bold and lively air, and as he played the opening bars, he heard behind him a creaking of the wicker chair. The sound was a perfectly familiar one—as of some person placing a hand on either arm of the chair preparatory to lowering himself into it, followed by another as of the same person being leisurely seated. But for the tones of the violin, all was silent, and the creaking of the chair was strangely distinct. The illusion was so complete that my brother stopped playing suddenly, and turned round expecting that some late friend of his had slipped in unawares, being attracted by the sound of the violin, or that Mr. Gaskell himself had returned. With the cessation of the music an absolute stillness fell upon all; the light of the single candle scarcely reached the darker corners of the room, but fell directly on the wicker chair and showed it to be perfectly empty. Half amused, half vexed with himself at having without reason interrupted his music, my brother returned to the *Gagliarda*; but some impulse induced him to light the candles in the sconces, which gave an illumination more adequate to the occasion. The *Gagliarda* and the last movement, a *Minuetto*, were finished, and John closed the book, intending, as it was now late, to seek his bed. As he shut the pages a creaking of the wicker chair again attracted his attention, and he heard distinctly sounds such as would be made by a person raising himself from a sitting posture. This time, being less surprised, he could more aptly consider the probable causes of such a circumstance, and easily arrived at the conclusion that there must be in the wicker chair osiers responsive to certain notes of the violin, as panes of glass in church windows are observed to vibrate in sympathy with certain tones of the organ. But while this argument approved itself to his reason, his imagination was but half convinced; and he could not but be impressed with the fact that the second creaking of the chair had been coincident with his shutting the music-book; and, unconsciously, pictured to himself some strange visitor waiting until the termination of the music, and then taking his departure.

His conjectures did not, however, either rob him of sleep or even disturb it with dreams, and he woke the next morning with a cooler mind and one less inclined to fantastic imagination. If the strange episode of the previous evening had not entirely vanished from his mind, it seemed at least fully accounted for by the acoustic explanation to which I have alluded above. Although he saw Mr.

Gaskell in the course of the morning, he did not think it necessary to mention to him so trivial a circumstance, but made with him an appointment to sup together in his own rooms that evening, and to amuse themselves afterwards by essaying some of the Italian music.

It was shortly after nine that night when, supper being finished, Mr. Gaskell seated himself at the piano and John tuned his violin. The evening was closing in; there had been heavy thunder-rain in the afternoon, and the moist air hung now heavy and steaming, while across it there throbbed the distant vibrations of the tenor bell at Christ Church. It was tolling the customary 101 strokes, which are rung every night in term-time as a signal for closing the college gates. The two young men enjoyed themselves for some while, playing first a suite by Cesti, and then two early sonatas by Buononcini. Both of them were sufficiently expert musicians to make reading at sight a pleasure rather than an effort; and Mr. Gaskell especially was well versed in the theory of music, and in the correct rendering of the *basso continuo*. After the Buononcini Mr. Gaskell took up the oblong copy of Graziani, and turning over its leaves, proposed that they should play the same suite which John had performed by himself the previous evening. His selection was apparently perfectly fortuitous, as my brother had purposely refrained from directing his attention in any way to that piece of music. They played the *Coranto* and the *Sarabanda*, and in the singular fascination of the music John had entirely forgotten the episode of the previous evening, when, as the bold air of the *Gagliarda* commenced, he suddenly became aware of the same strange creaking of the wicker chair that he had noticed on the first occasion. The sound was identical, and so exact was its resemblance to that of a person sitting down that he stared at the chair, almost wondering that it still appeared empty. Beyond turning his head sharply for a moment to look round, Mr. Gaskell took no notice of the sound; and my brother, ashamed to betray any foolish interest or excitement, continued the *Gagliarda*, with its repeat. At its conclusion Mr. Gaskell stopped before proceeding to the minuet, and turning the stool on which he was sitting round towards the room, observed, "How very strange, Johnnie,"—for these young men were on terms of sufficient intimacy to address each other in a familiar style,— "How very strange! I thought I heard some one sit down in that chair when we began the *Gagliarda*. I looked round quite expecting to see some one had come in. Did you hear nothing?"

"It was only the chair creaking," my brother answered, feigning an indifference which he scarcely felt. "Certain parts of the wicker-work seem to be in accord with musical notes and respond to them; let us continue with the *Minuetto*."

Thus they finished the suite, Mr. Gaskell demanding a repetition of the *Gagliarda*, with the air of which he was much pleased. As the clocks had already struck eleven, they determined not to play more that night; and Mr. Gaskell rose, blew out the sconces, shut the piano, and put the music aside. My brother has often assured me that he was quite prepared for what followed, and had been almost expecting it; for as the books were put away, a creaking of the wicker chair was audible, exactly similar to that which he had heard when he stopped playing on the previous night. There was a moment's silence; the young men looked involuntarily at one another, and then Mr. Gaskell said, "I cannot understand the creaking of that chair; it has never done so before, with all the music we have played. I am perhaps imaginative and excited with the fine airs we have heard to-night, but I have an impression that I cannot dispel that something has been sitting listening to us all this time, and that now when the concert is ended it has got up and gone." There was a spirit of raillery in his words, but his tone was not so light as it would ordinarily have been, and he was evidently ill at ease.

"Let us try the *Gagliarda* again," said my brother; "it is the vibration of the opening notes which affects the wicker-work, and we shall see if the noise is repeated." But Mr. Gaskell excused himself from trying the experiment, and after some desultory conversation, to which it was evident that neither was giving any serious attention, he took his leave and returned to New College.

CHAPTER II

I shall not weary you, my dear Edward, by recounting similar experiences which occurred on nearly every occasion that the young men met in the evenings for music. The repetition of the phenomenon had accustomed them to expect it. Both professed to be quite satisfied that it was to be attributed to acoustical affinities of vibration between the wicker-work and certain of the piano wires, and indeed this seemed the only explanation possible. But, at the same time, the resemblance of the noises to those caused by a person sitting down in or rising from a chair was so marked, that even their frequent recurrence never failed to make a strange impression on them. They felt a reluctance to mention the matter to their friends, partly from a fear of being themselves laughed at, and partly to spare from ridicule a circumstance to which each perhaps, in spite of himself, attached some degree of importance. Experience soon convinced them that the first noise as of one sitting down never occurred unless the *Gagliarda* of the "Areopagita" was played, and that this noise being once heard, the second only followed it when they ceased playing for the evening. They met every night, sitting later with the lengthening summer evenings, and every night, as by some tacit understanding, played the "Areopagita" suite before parting. At the opening bars of the *Gagliarda* the creaking of the chair occurred spontaneously with the utmost regularity. They seldom spoke even to one another of the subject; but one night, when John was putting away his violin after a long evening's music without having played the "Areopagita," Mr. Gaskell, who had risen from the pianoforte, sat down again as by a sudden impulse and said—

"Johnnie, do not put away your violin yet. It is near twelve o'clock and I shall get shut out, but I cannot stop to-night without playing the *Gagliarda*. Suppose that all our theories of vibration and affinity are wrong, suppose that there really comes here night by night some strange visitant to hear us, some poor creature whose heart is bound up in that tune; would it not be unkind to send him away without the hearing of that piece which he seems most to relish? Let us not be ill-mannered, but humour his whim; let us play the *Gagliarda*."

They played it with more vigour and precision than usual, and the now customary sound of one taking his seat at once ensued. It was that night that my brother, looking steadfastly at the chair, saw, or thought he saw, there some slight obscuration, some penumbra, mist, or subtle vapour which, as he gazed, seemed to struggle to take human form. He ceased playing for a moment and rubbed his eyes, but as he did so all dimness vanished and he saw the chair perfectly empty. The pianist stopped also at the cessation of the violin, and asked what ailed him.

"It is only that my eyes were dim," he answered.

"We have had enough for to-night," said Mr. Gaskell; "let us stop. I shall be locked out." He shut the piano, and as he did so the clock in New College tower struck twelve. He left the room running, but was late enough at his college door to be reported, admonished with a fine against such late hours, and confined for a week to college; for being out after midnight was considered, at that time at least, a somewhat serious offence.

Thus for some days the musical practice was compulsorily intermitted, but resumed on the first evening after Mr. Gaskell's term of confinement was expired. After they had performed several suites of Graziani, and finished as usual with the "Areopagita," Mr. Gaskell sat for a time silent at the instrument, as though thinking with himself, and then said—

"I cannot say how deeply this old-fashioned music affects me. Some would try to persuade us that these suites, of which the airs bear the names of different dances, were always written rather as a musical essay and for purposes of performance than for persons to dance to, as their names would more naturally imply. But I think these critics are wrong at least in some instances. It is to me impossible to believe that such a melody, for instance, as the *Giga* of Corelli which we have played, was not written for actual purposes of dancing. One can almost hear the beat of feet upon the floor,

and I imagine that in the time of Corelli the practice of dancing, while not a whit inferior in grace, had more of the tripudistic or beating character than is now esteemed consistent with a correct ball-room performance. The *Gagliarda* too, which we play now so constantly, possesses a singular power of assisting the imagination to picture or reproduce such scenes as those which it no doubt formerly enlivened. I know not why, but it is constantly identified in my mind with some revel which I have perhaps seen in a picture, where several couples are dancing a licentious measure in a long room lit by a number of silver sconces of the debased model common at the end of the seventeenth century. It is probably a reminiscence of my late excursion that gives to these dancers in my fancy the olive skin, dark hair, and bright eyes of the Italian type; and they wear dresses of exceedingly rich fabric and elaborate design. Imagination is whimsical enough to paint for me the character of the room itself, as having an arcade of arches running down one side alone, of the fantastic and paganised Gothic of the Renaissance. At the end is a gallery or balcony for the musicians, which on its coved front has a florid coat of arms of foreign heraldry. The shield bears, on a field *or*, a cherub's head blowing on three lilies—a blazon I have no doubt seen somewhere in my travels, though I cannot recollect where. This scene, I say, is so nearly connected in my brain with the *Gagliarda*, that scarcely are its first notes sounded ere it presents itself to my eyes with a vividness which increases every day. The couples advance, set, and recede, using free and licentious gestures which my imagination should be ashamed to recall. Amongst so many foreigners, fancy pictures, I know not in the least why, the presence of a young man of an English type of face, whose features, however, always elude my mind's attempt to fix them. I think that the opening subject of this *Gagliarda* is a superior composition to the rest of it, for it is only during the first sixteen bars that the vision of bygone revelry presents itself to me. With the last note of the sixteenth bar a veil is drawn suddenly across the scene, and with a sense almost of some catastrophe it vanishes. This I attribute to the fact that the second subject must be inferior in conception to the first, and by some sense of incongruity destroys the fabric which the fascination of the preceding one built up."

My brother, though he had listened with interest to what Mr. Gaskell had said, did not reply, and the subject was allowed to drop.

CHAPTER III

It was in the same summer of 1842, and near the middle of June, that my brother John wrote inviting me to come to Oxford for the Commemoration festivities. I had been spending some weeks with Mrs. Temple, a distant cousin of ours, at their house of Royston in Derbyshire, and John was desirous that Mrs. Temple should come up to Oxford and chaperone her daughter Constance and myself at the balls and various other entertainments which take place at the close of the summer term. Owing to Royston being some two hundred miles from Worth Maltravers, our families had hitherto seen little of one another, but during my present visit I had learned to love Mrs. Temple, a lady of singular sweetness of disposition, and had contracted a devoted attachment to her daughter Constance. Constance Temple was then eighteen years of age, and to great beauty united such mental graces and excellent traits of character as must ever appear to reasoning persons more enduringly valuable than even the highest personal attractions. She was well read and witty, and had been trained in those principles of true religion which she afterwards followed with devoted consistency in the self-sacrifice and resigned piety of her too short life. In person, I may remind you, my dear Edward, since death removed her ere you were of years to appreciate either her appearance or her qualities, she was tall, with a somewhat long and oval face, with brown hair and eyes.

Mrs. Temple readily accepted Sir John Maltravers' invitation. She had never seen Oxford herself, and was pleased to afford us the pleasure of so delightful an excursion. John had secured convenient rooms for us above the shop of a well-known printseller in High Street, and we arrived in Oxford on Friday evening, June 18, 1842. I shall not dilate to you on the various Commemoration festivities, which have probably altered little since those days, and with which you are familiar. Suffice it to say that my brother had secured us admission to every entertainment, and that we enjoyed our visit as only youth with its keen sensibilities and uncloyed pleasures can. I could not help observing that John was very much struck by the attractions of Miss Constance Temple, and that she for her part, while exhibiting no unbecoming forwardness, certainly betrayed no aversion to him. I was greatly pleased both with my own powers of observation which had enabled me to discover so important a fact, and also with the circumstance itself. To a romantic girl of nineteen it appeared high time that a brother of twenty-two should be at least preparing some matrimonial project; and my friend was so good and beautiful that it seemed impossible that I should ever obtain a more lovable sister or my brother a better wife. Mrs. Temple could not refuse her sanction to such a scheme; for while their mental qualities seemed eminently compatible, John was in his own right master of Worth Maltravers, and her daughter sole heiress of the Royston estates.

The Commemoration festivities terminated on Wednesday night with a grand ball at the Music-Room in Holywell Street. This was given by a Lodge of University Freemasons, and John was there with Mr. Gaskell—whose acquaintance we had made with much gratification—both wearing blue silk scarves and small white aprons. They introduced us to many other of their friends similarly adorned, and these important and mysterious insignia sat not amiss with their youthful figures and boyish faces. After a long and pleasurable programme, it was decided that we should prolong our visit till the next evening, leaving Oxford at half-past ten o'clock at night and driving to Didcot, there to join the mail for the west. We rose late the next morning and spent the day rambling among the old colleges and gardens of the most beautiful of English cities. At seven o'clock we dined together for the last time at our lodgings in High Street, and my brother proposed that before parting we should enjoy the fine evening in the gardens of St. John's College. This was at once agreed to, and we proceeded thither, John walking on in front with Constance and Mrs. Temple, and I following with Mr. Gaskell. My companion explained that these gardens were esteemed the most beautiful in the University, but that under ordinary circumstances it was not permitted to strangers to walk there of an evening. Here he quoted some Latin about "aurum per medios ire satellites," which I smilingly made as if I understood,

and did indeed gather from it that John had bribed the porter to admit us. It was a warm and very still night, without a moon, but with enough of fading light to show the outlines of the garden front. This long low line of buildings built in Charles I's reign looked so exquisitely beautiful that I shall never forget it, though I have not since seen its oriel windows and creeper-covered walls. There was a very heavy dew on the broad lawn, and we walked at first only on the paths. No one spoke, for we were oppressed by the very beauty of the scene, and by the sadness which an imminent parting from friends and from so sweet a place combined to cause. John had been silent and depressed the whole day, nor did Mr. Gaskell himself seem inclined to conversation. Constance and my brother fell a little way behind, and Mr. Gaskell asked me to cross the lawn if I was not afraid of the dew, that I might see the garden front to better advantage from the corner. Mrs. Temple waited for us on the path, not wishing to wet her feet. Mr. Gaskell pointed out the beauties of the perspective as seen from his vantage-point, and we were fortunate in hearing the sweet descant of nightingales for which this garden has ever been famous. As we stood silent and listening, a candle was lit in a small oriel at the end, and the light showing the tracery of the window added to the picturesqueness of the scene.

Within an hour we were in a landau driving through the still warm lanes to Didcot. I had seen that Constance's parting with my brother had been tender, and I am not sure that she was not in tears during some part at least of our drive; but I did not observe her closely, having my thoughts elsewhere.

Though we were thus being carried every moment further from the sleeping city, where I believe that both our hearts were busy, I feel as if I had been a personal witness of the incidents I am about to narrate, so often have I heard them from my brother's lips. The two young men, after parting with us in the High Street, returned to their respective colleges. John reached his rooms shortly before eleven o'clock. He was at once sad and happy—sad at our departure, but happy in a new-found world of delight which his admiration for Constance Temple opened to him. He was, in fact, deeply in love with her, and the full flood of a hitherto unknown passion filled him with an emotion so overwhelming that his ordinary life seemed transfigured. He moved, as it were, in an ether superior to our mortal atmosphere, and a new region of high resolves and noble possibilities spread itself before his eyes. He slammed his heavy outside door (called an "oak") to prevent anyone entering and flung himself into the window-seat. Here he sat for a long time, the sash thrown up and his head outside, for he was excited and feverish. His mental exaltation was so great and his thoughts of so absorbing an interest that he took no notice of time, and only remembered afterwards that the scent of a syringa-bush was borne up to him from a little garden-patch opposite, and that a bat had circled slowly up and down the lane, until he heard the clocks striking three. At the same time the faint light of dawn made itself felt almost imperceptibly; the classic statues on the roof of the schools began to stand out against the white sky, and a faint glimmer to penetrate the darkened room. It glistened on the varnished top of his violin-case lying on the table, and on a jug of toast-and-water placed there by his college servant or scout every night before he left. He drank a glass of this mixture, and was moving towards his bedroom door when a sudden thought struck him. He turned back, took the violin from its case, tuned it, and began to play the "Areopagita" suite. He was conscious of that mental clearness and vigour which not unfrequently comes with the dawn to those who have sat watching or reading through the night: and his thoughts were exalted by the effect which the first consciousness of a deep passion causes in imaginative minds. He had never played the suite with more power; and the airs, even without the piano part, seemed fraught with a meaning hitherto unrealised. As he began the *Gagliarda* he heard the wicker chair creak; but he had his back towards it, and the sound was now too familiar to him to cause him even to look round. It was not till he was playing the repeat that he became aware of a new and overpowering sensation. At first it was a vague feeling, so often experienced by us all, of not being alone. He did not stop playing, and in a few seconds the impression of a presence in the room other than his own became so strong that he was actually afraid to look round. But in another moment he felt that at all hazards he must see what or who this presence was. Without stopping he partly turned and partly looked over his shoulder. The silver light of early morning was filling the room,

making the various objects appear of less bright colour than usual, and giving to everything a pearl-grey neutral tint. In this cold but clear light he saw seated in the wicker chair the figure of a man.

In the first violent shock of so terrifying a discovery, he could not appreciate such details as those of features, dress, or appearance. He was merely conscious that with him, in a locked room of which he knew himself to be the only human inmate, there sat something which bore a human form. He looked at it for a moment with a hope, which he felt to be vain, that it might vanish and prove a phantom of his excited imagination, but still it sat there. Then my brother put down his violin, and he used to assure me that a horror overwhelmed him of an intensity which he had previously believed impossible. Whether the image which he saw was subjective or objective, I cannot pretend to say: you will be in a position to judge for yourself when you have finished this narrative. Our limited experience would lead us to believe that it was a phantom conjured up by some unusual condition of his own brain; but we are fain to confess that there certainly do exist in nature phenomena such as baffle human reason; and it is possible that, for some hidden purposes of Providence, permission may occasionally be granted to those who have passed from this life to assume again for a time the form of their earthly tabernacle. We must, I say, be content to suspend our judgment on such matters; but in this instance the subsequent course of events is very difficult to explain, except on the supposition that there was then presented to my brother's view the actual bodily form of one long deceased. The dread which took possession of him was due, he has more than once told me when analysing his feelings long afterwards, to two predominant causes. Firstly, he felt that mental dislocation which accompanies the sudden subversion of preconceived theories, the sudden alteration of long habit, or even the occurrence of any circumstance beyond the walk of our daily experience. This I have observed myself in the perturbing effect which a sudden death, a grievous accident, or in recent years the declaration of war, has exercised upon all except the most lethargic or the most determined minds. Secondly, he experienced the profound self-abasement or mental annihilation caused by the near conception of a being of a superior order. In the presence of an existence wearing, indeed, the human form, but of attributes widely different from and superior to his own, he felt the combined reverence and revulsion which even the noblest wild animals exhibit when brought for the first time face to face with man. The shock was so great that I feel persuaded it exerted an effect on him from which he never wholly recovered.

After an interval which seemed to him interminable, though it was only of a second's duration, he turned his eyes again to the occupant of the wicker chair. His faculties had so far recovered from the first shock as to enable him to see that the figure was that of a man perhaps thirty-five years of age and still youthful in appearance. The face was long and oval, the hair brown, and brushed straight off an exceptionally high forehead. His complexion was very pale or bloodless. He was clean shaven, and his finely cut mouth, with compressed lips, wore something of a sneering smile. His general expression was unpleasing, and from the first my brother felt as by intuition that there was present some malign and wicked influence. His eyes were not visible, as he kept them cast down, resting his head on his hand in the attitude of one listening. His face and even his dress were impressed so vividly upon John's mind, that he never had any difficulty in recalling them to his imagination; and he and I had afterwards an opportunity of verifying them in a remarkable manner. He wore a long cut-away coat of green cloth with an edge of gold embroidery, and a white satin waistcoat figured with rose-sprigs, a full cravat of rich lace, knee-breeches of buff silk, and stockings of the same. His shoes were of polished black leather with heavy silver buckles, and his costume in general recalled that worn a century ago. As my brother gazed at him, he got up, putting his hands on the arms of the chair to raise himself, and causing the creaking so often heard before. The hands forced themselves on my brother's notice: they were very white, with the long delicate fingers of a musician. He showed a considerable height; and still keeping his eyes on the floor, walked with an ordinary gait towards the end of the bookcase at the side of the room farthest from the window. He reached the bookcase,

and then John suddenly lost sight of him. The figure did not fade gradually, but went out, as it were, like the flame of a suddenly extinguished candle.

The room was now filled with the clear light of the summer morning: the whole vision had lasted but a few seconds, but my brother knew that there was no possibility of his having been mistaken, that the mystery of the creaking chair was solved, that he had seen the man who had come evening by evening for a month past to listen to the rhythm of the *Gagliarda*. Terribly disturbed, he sat for some time half dreading and half expecting a return of the figure; but all remained unchanged: he saw nothing, nor did he dare to challenge its reappearance by playing again the *Gagliarda*, which seemed to have so strange an attraction for it. At last, in the full sunlight of a late June morning at Oxford, he heard the steps of early pedestrians on the pavement below his windows, the cry of a milkman, and other sounds which showed the world was awake. It was after six o'clock, and going to his bedroom he flung himself on the outside of the bed for an hour's troubled slumber.

CHAPTER IV

When his servant called him about eight o'clock my brother sent a note to Mr. Gaskell at New College, begging him to come round to Magdalen Hall as soon as might be in the course of the morning. His summons was at once obeyed, and Mr. Gaskell was with him before he had finished breakfast. My brother was still much agitated, and at once told him what had happened the night before, detailing the various circumstances with minuteness, and not even concealing from him the sentiments which he entertained towards Miss Constance Temple. In narrating the appearance which he had seen in the chair, his agitation was still so excessive that he had difficulty in controlling his voice.

Mr. Gaskell heard him with much attention, and did not at once reply when John had finished his narration. At length he said, "I suppose many friends would think it right to affect, even if they did not feel, an incredulity as to what you have just told me. They might consider it more prudent to attempt to allay your distress by persuading you that what you have seen has no objective reality, but is merely the phantasm of an excited imagination; that if you had not been in love, had not sat up all night, and had not thus overtaxed your physical powers, you would have seen no vision. I shall not argue thus, for I am as certainly convinced as of the fact that we sit here, that on all the nights when we have played this suite called the 'Areopagita,' there has been some one listening to us, and that you have at length been fortunate or unfortunate enough to see him."

"Do not say fortunate," said my brother; "for I feel as though I shall never recover from last night's shock."

"That is likely enough," Mr. Gaskell answered, coolly; "for as in the history of the race or individual, increased culture and a finer mental susceptibility necessarily impair the brute courage and powers of endurance which we note in savages, so any supernatural vision such as you have seen must be purchased at the cost of physical reaction. From the first evening that we played this music, and heard the noises mimicking so closely the sitting down and rising up of some person, I have felt convinced that causes other than those which we usually call natural were at work, and that we were very near the manifestation of some extraordinary phenomenon."

"I do not quite apprehend your meaning."

"I mean this," he continued, "that this man or spirit of a man has been sitting here night after night, and that we have not been able to see him, because our minds are dull and obtuse. Last night the elevating force of a strong passion, such as that which you have confided to me, combined with the power of fine music, so exalted your mind that you became endowed, as it were, with a sixth sense, and suddenly were enabled to see that which had previously been invisible. To this sixth sense music gives, I believe, the key. We are at present only on the threshold of such a knowledge of that art as will enable us to use it eventually as the greatest of all humanising and educational agents. Music will prove a ladder to the loftier regions of thought; indeed I have long found for myself that I cannot attain to the highest range of my intellectual power except when hearing good music. All poets, and most writers of prose, will say that their thought is never so exalted, their sense of beauty and proportion never so just, as when they are listening either to the artificial music made by man, or to some of the grander tones of nature, such as the roar of a western ocean, or the sighing of wind in a clump of firs. Though I have often felt on such occasions on the very verge of some high mental discovery, and though a hand has been stretched forward as it were to rend the veil, yet it has never been vouchsafed me to see behind it. This you no doubt were allowed in a measure to do last night. You probably played the music with a deeper intuition than usual, and this, combined with the excitement under which you were already labouring, raised you for a moment to the required pitch of mental exaltation."

"It is true," John said, "that I never felt the melody so deeply as when I played it last night."

"Just so," answered his friend; "and there is probably some link between this air and the history of the man whom you saw last night; some fatal power in it which enables it to exert an attraction on him even after death. For we must remember that the influence of music, though always powerful, is not always for good. We can scarcely doubt that as certain forms of music tend to raise us above the sensuality of the animal, or the more degrading passion of material gain, and to transport us into the ether of higher thought, so other forms are directly calculated to awaken in us luxurious emotions, and to whet those sensual appetites which it is the business of a philosopher not indeed to annihilate or to be ashamed of, but to keep rigidly in check. This possibility of music to effect evil as well as good I have seen recognised, and very aptly expressed in some beautiful verses by Mr. Keble which I have just read:—

"Cease, stranger, cease those witching notes,
The art of syren choirs;
Hush the seductive voice that floats
Across the trembling wires.

"Music's ethereal power was given
Not to dissolve our clay,
But draw Promethean beams from heaven
To purge the dross away."

"They are fine lines," said my brother, "but I do not see how you apply your argument to the present instance."

"I mean," Mr. Gaskell answered, "that I have little doubt that the melody of this *Gagliarda* has been connected in some manner with the life of the man you saw last night. It is not unlikely, either, that it was a favourite air of his whilst in the flesh, or even that it was played by himself or others at the moment of some crisis in his history. It is possible that such connection may be due merely to the innocent pleasure the melody gave him in life; but the nature of the music itself, and a peculiar effect it has upon my own thoughts, induce me to believe that it was associated with some occasion when he either fell into great sin or when some evil fate, perhaps even death itself, overtook him. You will remember I have told you that this air calls up to my mind a certain scene of Italian revelry in which an Englishman takes part. It is true that I have never been able to fix his features in my mind, nor even to say exactly how he was dressed. Yet now some instinct tells me that it is this very man whom you saw last night. It is not for us to attempt to pierce the mystery which veils from our eyes the secrets of an after-death existence; but I can scarcely suppose that a spirit entirely at rest would feel so deeply the power of a certain melody as to be called back by it to his old haunts like a dog by his master's whistle. It is more probable that there is some evil history connected with the matter, and this, I think, we ought to consider if it be possible to unravel."

My brother assenting, he continued, "When this man left you, Johnnie, did he walk to the door?"

"No; he made for the side wall, and when he reached the end of the bookcase I lost sight of him."

Mr. Gaskell went to the bookcase and looked for a moment at the titles of the books, as though expecting to see something in them to assist his inquiries; but finding apparently no clue, he said—

"This is the last time we shall meet for three months or more; let us play the *Gagliarda* and see if there be any response."

My brother at first would not hear of this, showing a lively dread of challenging any reappearance of the figure he had seen: indeed he felt that such an event would probably fling him into a state of serious physical disorder. Mr. Gaskell, however, continued to press him, assuring him that the fact of his now being no longer alone should largely allay any fear on his part, and urging that this would be the last opportunity they would have of playing together for some months.

At last, being overborne, my brother took his violin, and Mr. Gaskell seated himself at the pianoforte. John was very agitated, and as he commenced the *Gagliarda* his hands trembled so that he could scarcely play the air. Mr. Gaskell also exhibited some nervousness, not performing with his customary correctness. But for the first time the charm failed: no noise accompanied the music, nor did anything of an unusual character occur. They repeated the whole suite, but with a similar result.

Both were surprised, but neither, had any explanation to offer. My brother, who at first dreaded intensely a repetition of the vision, was now almost disappointed that nothing had occurred; so quickly does the mood of man change.

After some further conversation the young men parted for the Long Vacation—John returning to Worth Maltravers and Mr. Gaskell going to London, where he was to pass a few days before he proceeded to his home in Westmorland.

CHAPTER V

John spent nearly the whole of this summer vacation at Worth Maltravers. He had been anxious to pay a visit to Royston; but the continued and serious illness of Mrs. Temple's sister had called her and Constance to Scotland, where they remained until the death of their relative allowed them to return to Derbyshire in the late autumn. John and I had been brought up together from childhood. When he was at Eton we had always spent the holidays at Worth, and after my dear mother's death, when we were left quite alone, the bonds of our love were naturally drawn still closer. Even after my brother went to Oxford, at a time when most young men are anxious to enjoy a new-found liberty, and to travel or to visit friends in their vacation, John's ardent affection for me and for Worth Maltravers kept him at home; and he was pleased on most occasions to make me the partner of his thoughts and of his pleasures. This long vacation of 1842 was, I think, the happiest of our lives. In my case I know it was so, and I think it was happy also for him; for none could guess that the small cloud seen in the distance like a man's hand was afterwards to rise and darken all his later days. It was a summer of brilliant and continued sunshine; many of the old people said that they could never recollect so fine a season, and both fruit and crops were alike abundant. John hired a small cutter-yacht, the *Palestine*, which he kept in our little harbour of Encombe, and in which he and I made many excursions, visiting Weymouth, Lyme Regis, and other places of interest on the south coast.

In this summer my brother confided to me two secrets,—his love for Constance Temple, which indeed was after all no secret, and the history of the apparition which he had seen. This last filled me with inexpressible dread and distress. It seemed cruel and unnatural that any influence so dark and mysterious should thus intrude on our bright life, and from the first I had an impression which I could not entirely shake off, that any such appearance or converse of a disembodied spirit must portend misfortune, if not worse, to him who saw or heard it. It never occurred to me to combat or to doubt the reality of the vision; he believed that he had seen it, and his conviction was enough to convince me. He had meant, he said, to tell no one, and had given a promise to Mr. Gaskell to that effect; but I think that he could not bear to keep such a matter in his own breast, and within the first week of his return he made me his confidant. I remember, my dear Edward, the look everything wore on that sad night when he first told me what afterwards proved so terrible a secret. We had dined quite alone, and he had been moody and depressed all the evening. It was a chilly night, with some fret blowing up from the sea. The moon showed that blunted and deformed appearance which she assumes a day or two past the full, and the moisture in the air encircled her with a stormy-looking halo. We had stepped out of the dining-room windows on to the little terrace looking down towards Smedmore and Encombe. The glaucous shrubs that grow in between the balusters were wet and dripping with the salt breath of the sea, and we could hear the waves coming into the cove from the west. After standing a minute I felt chill, and proposed that we should go back to the billiard-room, where a fire was lit on all except the warmest nights. "No," John said, "I want to tell you something, Sophy," and then we walked on to the old boat summer-house. There he told me everything. I cannot describe to you my feelings of anguish and horror when he told me of the appearance of the man. The interest of the tale was so absorbing to me that I took no note of time, nor of the cold night air, and it was only when it was all finished that I felt how deadly chill it had become. "Let us go in, John," I said; "I am cold and feel benumbed."

But youth is hopeful and strong, and in another week the impression had faded from our minds, and we were enjoying the full glory of midsummer weather, which I think only those know who have watched the blue sea come rippling in at the foot of the white chalk cliffs of Dorset.

I had felt a reluctance even so much as to hear the air of the *Gagliarda*, and though he had spoken to me of the subject on more than one occasion, my brother had never offered to play it to me. I knew that he had the copy of Graziani's suites with him at Worth Maltravers, because he had

told me that he had brought it from Oxford; but I had never seen the book, and fancied that he kept it intentionally locked up. He did not, however, neglect the violin, and during the summer mornings, as I sat reading or working on the terrace, I often heard him playing to himself in the library. Though he had never even given me any description of the melody of the *Gagliarda*, yet I felt certain that he not infrequently played it. I cannot say how it was; but from the moment that I heard him one morning in the library performing an air set in a curiously low key, it forced itself upon my attention, and I knew, as it were by instinct, that it must be the *Gagliarda* of the "Areopagita." He was using a *sordino* and playing it very softly; but I was not mistaken. One wet afternoon in October, only a week before the time of his leaving us to return to Oxford for the autumn term, he walked into the drawing-room where I was sitting, and proposed that we should play some music together. To this I readily agreed. Though but a mediocre performer, I have always taken much pleasure in the use of the pianoforte, and esteemed it an honour whenever he asked me to play with him, since my powers as a musician were so very much inferior to his. After we had played several pieces, he took up an oblong music-book bound in white vellum, placed it upon the desk of the pianoforte, and proposed that we should play a suite by Graziani. I knew that he meant the "Areopagita," and begged him at once not to ask me to play it. He rallied me lightly on my fears, and said it would much please him to play it, as he had not heard the pianoforte part since he had left Oxford three months ago. I saw that he was eager to perform it, and being loath to disoblige so kind a brother during the last week of his stay at home, I at length overcame my scruples and set out to play it. But I was so alarmed at the possibility of any evil consequences ensuing, that when we commenced the *Gagliarda* I could scarcely find my notes. Nothing in any way unusual, however, occurred; and being reassured by this, and feeling an irresistible charm in the music, I finished the suite with more appearance of ease. My brother, however, was, I fear, not satisfied with my performance, and compared it, very possibly, with that of Mr. Gaskell, to which it was necessarily much inferior, both through weakness of execution and from my insufficient knowledge of the principles of the *basso continuo*. We stopped playing, and John stood looking out of the window across the sea, where the sky was clearing low down under the clouds. The sun went down behind Portland in a fiery glow which cheered us after a long day's rain. I had taken the copy of Graziani's suites off the desk, and was holding it on my lap turning over the old foxed and yellow pages. As I closed it a streak of evening sunlight fell across the room and lighted up a coat of arms stamped in gilt on the cover. It was much faded and would ordinarily have been hard to make out; but the ray of strong light illumined it, and in an instant I recognised the same shield which Mr. Gaskell had pictured to himself as hanging on the musicians' gallery of his phantasmal dancing-room. My brother had often recounted to me this effort of his friend's imagination, and here I saw before me the same florid foreign blazon, a cherub's head blowing on three lilies on a gold field. This discovery was not only of interest, but afforded me much actual relief; for it accounted rationally for at least one item of the strange story. Mr. Gaskell had no doubt noticed at some time this shield stamped on the outside of the book, and bearing the impression of it unconsciously in his mind, had reproduced it in his imagined revels. I said as much to my brother, and he was greatly interested, and after examining the shield agreed that this was certainly a probable solution of that part of the mystery. On the 12th of October John returned to Oxford.

CHAPTER VI

My brother told me afterwards that more than once during the summer vacation he had seriously considered with himself the propriety of changing his rooms at Magdalen Hall. He had thought that it might thus be possible for him to get rid at once of the memory of the apparition, and of the fear of any reappearance of it. He could either have moved into another set of rooms in the Hall itself, or else gone into lodgings in the town—a usual proceeding, I am told, for gentlemen near the end of their course at Oxford. Would to God that he had indeed done so! but with the supineness which has, I fear, my dear Edward, been too frequently a characteristic of our family, he shrank from the trouble such a course would involve, and the opening of the autumn term found him still in his old rooms. You will forgive me for entering here on a very brief description of your father's sitting-room. It is, I think, necessary for the proper understanding of the incidents that follow. It was not a large room, though probably the finest in the small buildings of Magdalen Hall, and panelled from floor to ceiling with oak which successive generations had obscured by numerous coats of paint. On one side were two windows having an aspect on to New College Lane, and fitted with deep cushioned seats in the recesses. Outside these windows there were boxes of flowers, the brightness of which formed in the summer term a pretty contrast to the grey and crumbling stone, and afforded pleasure at once to the inmate and to passers-by. Along nearly the whole length of the wall opposite to the windows, some tenant in years long past had had mahogany book-shelves placed, reaching to a height of perhaps five feet from the floor. They were handsomely made in the style of the eighteenth century and pleased my brother's taste. He had always exhibited a partiality for books, and the fine library at Worth Maltravers had no doubt contributed to foster his tastes in that direction. At the time of which I write he had formed a small collection for himself at Oxford, paying particular attention to the bindings, and acquiring many excellent specimens of that art, principally I think, from Messrs. Payne & Foss, the celebrated London booksellers.

Towards the end of the autumn term, having occasion one cold day to take down a volume of Plato from its shelf, he found to his surprise that the book was quite warm. A closer examination easily explained to him the reason—namely, that the flue of a chimney, passing behind one end of the bookcase, sensibly heated not only the wall itself, but also the books in the shelves. Although he had been in his rooms now near three years, he had never before observed this fact; partly, no doubt, because the books in these shelves were seldom handled, being more for show as specimens of bindings than for practical use. He was somewhat annoyed at this discovery, fearing lest such a heat, which in moderation is beneficial to books, might through its excess warp the leather or otherwise injure the bindings. Mr. Gaskell was sitting with him at the time of the discovery, and indeed it was for his use that my brother had taken down the volume of Plato. He strongly advised that the bookcase should be moved, and suggested that it would be better to place it across that end of the room where the pianoforte then stood. They examined it and found that it would easily admit of removal, being, in fact, only the frame of a bookcase, and showing at the back the painted panelling of the wall. Mr. Gaskell noted it as curious that all the shelves were fixed and immovable except one at the end, which had been fitted with the ordinary arrangement allowing its position to be altered at will. My brother thought that the change would improve the appearance of his rooms, besides being advantageous for the books, and gave instructions to the college upholsterer to have the necessary work carried out at once.

The two young men had resumed their musical studies, and had often played the "Areopagita" and other music of Graziani since their return to Oxford in the Autumn. They remarked, however, that the chair no longer creaked during the *Gagliarda*—and, in fact, that no unusual occurrence whatever attended its performance. At times they were almost tempted to doubt the accuracy of their own remembrances, and to consider as entirely mythical the mystery which had so much disturbed them in

the summer term. My brother had also pointed out to Mr. Gaskell my discovery that the coat of arms on the outside of the music-book was identical with that which his fancy portrayed on the musicians' gallery. He readily admitted that he must at some time have noticed and afterwards forgotten the blazon on the book, and that an unconscious reminiscence of it had no doubt inspired his imagination in this instance. He rebuked my brother for having agitated me unnecessarily by telling me at all of so idle a tale; and was pleased to write a few lines to me at Worth Maltravers, felicitating me on my shrewdness of perception, but speaking banteringly of the whole matter.

On the evening of the 14th of November my brother and his friend were sitting talking in the former's room. The position of the bookcase had been changed on the morning of that day, and Mr. Gaskell had come round to see how the books looked when placed at the end instead of at the side of the room. He had applauded the new arrangement, and the young men sat long over the fire, with a bottle of college port and a dish of medlars which I had sent my brother from our famous tree in the Upper Croft at Worth Maltravers. Later on they fell to music, and played a variety of pieces, performing also the "Areopagita" suite. Mr. Gaskell before he left complimented John on the improvement which the alteration in the place of the bookcase had made in his room, saying, "Not only do the books in their present place very much enhance the general appearance of the room, but the change seems to me to have affected also a marked acoustical improvement. The oak panelling now exposed on the side of the room has given a resonant property to the wall which is peculiarly responsive to the tones of your violin. While you were playing the *Gagliarda* to-night, I could almost have imagined that someone in an adjacent room was playing the same air with a *sordino*, so distinct was the echo."

Shortly after this he left.

My brother partly undressed himself in his bedroom, which adjoined, and then returning to his sitting-room, pulled the large wicker chair in front of the fire, and sat there looking at the glowing coals, and thinking perhaps of Miss Constance Temple. The night promised to be very cold, and the wind whistled down the chimney, increasing the comfortable sensation of the clear fire. He sat watching the ruddy reflection of the firelight dancing on the panelled wall, when he noticed that a picture placed where the end of the bookcase formerly stood was not truly hung, and needed adjustment. A picture hung askew was particularly offensive to his eyes, and he got up at once to alter it. He remembered as he went up to it that at this precise spot four months ago he had lost sight of the man's figure which he saw rise from the wicker chair, and at the memory felt an involuntary shudder. This reminiscence probably influenced his fancy also in another direction; for it seemed to him that very faintly, as though played far off, and with the *sordino*, he could hear the air of the *Gagliarda*. He put one hand behind the picture to steady it, and as he did so his finger struck a very slight projection in the wall. He pulled the picture a little to one side, and saw that what he had touched was the back of a small hinge sunk in the wall, and almost obliterated with many coats of paint. His curiosity was excited, and he took a candle from the table and examined the wall carefully. Inspection soon showed him another hinge a little further up, and by degrees he perceived that one of the panels had been made at some time in the past to open, and serve probably as the door of a cupboard. At this point he assured me that a feverish anxiety to re-open this cupboard door took possession of him, and that the intense excitement filled his mind which we experience on the eve of a discovery which we fancy may produce important results. He loosened the paint in the cracks with a penknife, and attempted to press open the door; but his instrument was not adequate to such a purpose, and all his efforts remained ineffective. His excitement had now reached an overmastering pitch; for he anticipated, though he knew not why, some strange discovery to be made in this sealed cupboard. He looked round the room for some weapon with which to force the door, and at length with his penknife cut away sufficient wood at the joint to enable him to insert the end of the poker in the hole. The clock in the New College Tower struck one at the exact moment when with a sharp effort he thus forced open the door. It appeared never to have had a fastening, but merely to have been stuck fast by the

accumulation of paint. As he bent it slowly back upon the rusted hinges his heart beat so fast that he could scarcely catch his breath, though he was conscious all the while of a ludicrous aspect of his position, knowing that it was most probable that the cavity within would be found empty. The cupboard was small but very deep, and in the obscure light seemed at first to contain nothing except a small heap of dust and cobwebs. His sense of disappointment was keen as he thrust his hand into it, but changed again in a moment to breathless interest on feeling something solid in what he had imagined to be only an accumulation of mould and dirt. He snatched up a candle, and holding this in one hand, with the other pulled out an object from the cupboard and put it on the table, covered as it was with the curious drapery of black and clinging cobwebs which I have seen adhering to bottles of old wine. It lay there between the dish of medlars and the decanter, veiled indeed with thick dust as with a mantle, but revealing beneath it the shape and contour of a violin.

CHAPTER VII

John was excited at his discovery, and felt his thoughts confused in a manner that I have often experienced myself on the unexpected receipt of news interesting me deeply, whether for pleasure or pain. Yet at the same time he was half amused at his own excitement, feeling that it was childish to be moved over an event so simple as the finding of a violin in an old cupboard. He soon collected himself and took up the instrument, using great care, as he feared lest age should have rendered the wood brittle or rotten. With some vigorous puffs of breath and a little dusting with a handkerchief he removed the heavy outer coating of cobwebs, and began to see more clearly the delicate curves of the body and of the scroll. A few minutes' more gentle handling left the instrument sufficiently clean to enable him to appreciate its chief points. Its seclusion from the outer world, which the heavy accumulation of dust proved to have been for many years, did not seem to have damaged it in the least; and the fact of a chimney-flue passing through the wall at no great distance had no doubt conduced to maintain the air in the cupboard at an equable temperature. So far as he was able to judge, the wood was as sound as when it left the maker's hands; but the strings were of course broken, and curled up in little tangled knots. The body was of a light-red colour, with a varnish of peculiar lustre and softness. The neck seemed rather longer than ordinary, and the scroll was remarkably bold and free.

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