

Garland Hamlin

Victor Ollnee's Discipline



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I

VICTOR READS THE FATEFUL STAR

Saturday had been a strenuous day for the baseball team of Winona University, and Victor Ollnee, its redoubtable catcher, slept late. Breakfast at the Beta Kappa Fraternity House on Sunday started without him, and Gilbert Frenson, who never played ball or tennis, and Arnold Macey, who was too effeminate to swing a bat, divided the Sunday morning *Star* between them.

"See here, Gil," called Macey, holding up an illustrated page, "do you suppose this woman is any relation to Vic?"

Frenson took the paper and glanced at it casually. It contained a full-page lurid article, printed in two colors, with the picture of a tall, serpentine, heavy-eyed, yet beautiful woman, whose long arms (ending in claws) reached for the heart of a sleeping man. "What is it all about?" asked Frenson, as his eyes roamed over the text.

"It seems to be an attack on a medium named Ollnee who pretends to be able to bring the dead to life. According to this article, she's the limit as a fraud. You don't suppose – Ollnee is an unusual name – "

"Oh, not so very. I suppose it's another way of spelling Olney. I don't see any reason to connect old Vic with any such woman as that."

"No, only he's always been kind of secretive about his folks. You'll admit that. Why, we don't even know where he came from! Nobody does, unless you do."

Frensen dipped into the article. "Wow! this *is* a hot one! Lucile has a case for libel all right – unless the reporter happens to be telling the truth."

"Hello, Vic!" he shouted, as a tall, broad-shouldered, but rather lean young fellow entered the room. "Vic, you are discovered!"

"What's the excitement?" asked the newcomer.

"Here's an article in the Sunday paper you should see. It's all about a woman namesake of yours, a medium named Lucile Ollnee. The name is spelled exactly like yours. Say, old man, I didn't know you were the son of an 'infamous faker.' Why didn't you let us know." His tone was comic.

Young Ollnee took the paper quietly, but, as he read, a look of bewilderment came upon his face.

"How about it, Vic?" repeated Macey. "You seem to be hard hit. Is she an aunt or a sister?"

Rising abruptly, Victor left the room, taking the paper with him.

Macey uttered a word of astonishment, but Frensen, after a pause, said, soberly, "There's something doing here, Sissy. He didn't act a bit funny; but it's up to us to keep quiet till we know just where we stand. If that woman *is* related to Vic he's going to be fighting mad. I guess I'd better go up and see how he's taking it. He certainly did seem jolted." He turned to utter a warning. "Don't say anything to the other fellows till I come back."

Macey promised, and Frenson went up the stairs and into the little study which he and Victor shared in common. The windows were open and the bird-songs and the fragrance of a glorious May morning flooded the room with joy, but in the midst of its radiance young Ollnee sat, bent above the fateful printed page.

As Frenson entered he raised his head. "Have you read this thing, Frens?" he asked, tremulously.

"Part of it."

"Frens, Lucy Ollnee is my mother. This article is full of lies, but it's based on facts. I'd like to kill the man that wrote it," he added, savagely.

"Let me look at it again," said Frenson.

Victor handed the paper to him and sat in silence while Frenson went over the article with studious care. It was an exceedingly able and bitter presentation of the opposition side. It left no excuse, no palliation for a career such as that of Lucile Ollnee.

"She is fraudulent from beginning to end," the writer passionately declared. "From her heart outward she is as vile, as remorseless, as mysterious as a vampire. No one knows from what foul nest she sprang. She battens upon the sick, the world-weary, the sorrowing. Her hokus-pokus is so simple that it would deceive no one but those who are blinded by their own tears. She has just one human trait. She is said to be educating a son at an Eastern university on the profits of her vile trade. It is said that she is keeping him in ignorance of her way of life."

Frenson looked up at his friend. "Vic, what do you know of this business?"

"Almost nothing. I don't know very much of even my mother's relations. The first that I can remember is our home in La Crescent. My father's name was Paul Ollnee, but I can't remember him. He died before I was three years old. We left La Crescent when I was about eight and went to the city. I can't remember very much previous to that time, but after we moved to the city I know my mother set up her 'ghost-room' again."

"Ghost-room?"

"Yes, that's what I called it. I can't remember when there was not a 'ghost-room' in our house. As far back as when I was five years old we had it, and I was just getting old enough to wonder about it when we moved to the city."

"What kind of a den was this ghost-room?"

"It looked like any other bright and pretty room, but I never got more than a glimpse of it, for I was afraid of it. There was nice paper on the wall, I remember, and a desk with books, and there were some tall tin horns standing in the corner. Oh yes, and always an old walnut table. There's something queer about that. I don't understand why my mother should have taken that table down to the city with her, but she did. It was just an old, battered-up walnut stand, and yet she seemed to think the world of it. She put it in the center of her room in the city just as she used to have it in our old home. Oh, how I hated that room! There was something uncanny about it. There was always a string of strange men and women going into it with my mother, and I was always sent away to play when they came. Oh, Gil" – his voice broke – "she is a medium, but she's not the awful creature they make her out."

"Of course not. We all know how these things go."

"You see, I went away to boarding-school when I was ten. This paper says I was sent away to keep me clear of the business that went on at home. I'm not sure but that is true, for I've seen very little of my mother's home life since."

"Didn't you visit her during vacations?"

"No, she always came to see me, and we took trips here and there. We'd go East, or to Colorado somewhere. Oh, we've had such splendid times together, Gil. She brought me presents and sent me money –" He looked out of the window for a few moments before he could go on. "And now – The other fellows will see that article, of course."

"Yes, the whole town will be reading it in an hour. However, they may not connect you with it."

"Oh yes, they will, and they'll believe every word of it, and they'll understand that I am Lucy Ollnee's son. This finishes me, Gil. Everybody will think I *knew* how my mother earned her money, and they'll despise me for taking it." He rose in an agony of shame. "I might as well be at the bottom of the lake."

"Don't take it so hard, old man. You're a big favorite here," said Frenson, with intent to offer consolation. "The work you've done on the team will go a long ways toward carrying you through this thing. Brace up; all is not lost."

The stricken youth was not listening. "Just think, Gil, she's been doing all this for me! I knew she claimed to have messages, but I didn't know that I was living on money earned in that way. You see, we own some houses in La Crescent, and I just took it for granted that our living came from them." He was white with pain now. "This ends my career here. I've got to get out, and do it quick. I'll be the laughing stock of the whole town by noon."

Frenson, deeply sympathetic, did his best to minimize the effect of the disclosure, but with Victor's corroboration of the reporter's charges, he was forced to admit that Mrs. Ollnee was either an imposter or a woman of unsound mind. Little by little he drew from the stricken youth other interesting details.

"I remember having a fight with a city boy by the name of Barker," said Victor, "because he yelled at me 'sonova medium' till I stopped his mouth with my fist. It seems to me as if it were the very next day that my mother took me to Mirror Lake and put me in a boarding-school. That fight must have influenced her. Perhaps up to that moment our neighbors had let us alone. I can understand now why she always visited me and why she never offered to take me to the city."

He did not say that this very aloofness had made of her, to him, a serene and lofty figure, but so it was. She had come to him out of the unknown distance, a mysterious queen of the fairies, with something very sad and very sweet in her face and something very appealing in her voice. There was nothing commonplace, nothing associated with toil or worry in his memory of her. Her broad, full brow, her deep-blue eyes, and her frail little body put her apart from other women. As he dwelt now on her dignity, her loving care, his heart grew strong with resolution. "Gilbert," he called, suddenly, "I'm going down there and defend her from those beasts."

Frenson was not surprised. "I reckon that's your little stunt," he retorted, student-fashion, but he was very much in earnest, nevertheless. "I'm wondering what old Boyden will say."

Victor believed in Professor Boyden and honored him, but at the moment the thought of facing him was painful. Boyden was one of those who tested the human soul with the electric bell, the clock, and the spymograph. Delusions were among his hobbies. Hysteria was a great word with him. Man lived among appearances. Personality was not a unit, but an aggregate, liable to disassociation, and the hysterical girl was capable of deceiving the very elect. To him, mediumship was merely the sign of immorality or epilepsy.

A part of this disrupting philosophy had entered Victor's head, and as he slowly and minutely re-read that cruel newspaper analysis of his sweet and gentle mother he was startled, but a little comforted by the thought that she might be the victim of her subconscious self, "She can't mean to cheat. Of that I am certain. But she needs me just the same. I'm going to earn her living and mine in some honest way."

Two or three of his most intimate friends came up after breakfast and started in to chaff, but, being far past the stage of evasion, Victor frankly confessed his relationship to the medium and hotly defended her, ending by mournfully, declaring his intention of leaving school at once and forever.

Thereupon, his visitors also became very serious, perceiving the tumult of doubt and despair into which he had been thrown, and one by one they fell into awkward silence and slipped away, leaving him alone with Frenson, who had been giving the most careful thought to the whole situation.

"Of course the fellow who wrote this article had his own private grouch. Any one can see that. And your friends are not going to condemn your mother on what he says. But all the same, you're wound up pretty tight, Vic; there's no two ways about that. According to your own statement she does claim to hear voices, and she does claim to give messages from the dead. Now, I'm not saying all this is impossible, but you know as well as I do that Boyden and his kind say 'Nitsky' to the whole business."

"I don't care what she's done," retorted Victor; "she has stood by me like a brick all these years, and now it's up to me to do something for her when she's in trouble."

Frenson admitted that this was a human and righteous resolution on the part of his chum and offered to help in any possible way.

Victor, too full of grief and despair to think clearly, went about his packing with swollen throat. There was keen pain in the thought of abandoning this bright room, of discarding all his trophies, books, and pictures, but this he did, putting nothing into his trunk but his clothing and a few photographs of his dearest girl friends. "What's the use?" he said to Frenson. "It's me to the spade or the ice-tongs, now. I won't need these things any more. It's battle in the arena of trade for Vic from this time on."

Frenson looked around at the little library. "Well, I'll hold them together for a while. Maybe you'll be able to come back and graduate, after all."

"Never! Don't you see I can't take another cent of my mother's money now that I know how it's earned?"

Frenson listened unexcitedly. "Well, now, suppose these voices should turn out to be real? Suppose these messages have been from the dead?"

"It wouldn't make any difference."

"Oh yes, it would. At least it would to me. Scientific men have been against a whole lot of things in the past that turned out to be true. Natural selection, for instance, and X-rays and the wireless telephone."

"I see your drift, Gil. You want to be a comfort to me, but I've been digging down into my memory, and I know now that my mother has been trained into these habits, these delusions, for over twenty years. It won't be an easy thing to get her out of them. She is as much deceived as the rest. I am sure of that."

"Well, why don't you experiment with her? Make a test," suggested Frenson.

"Would you experiment with your own mother?" asked Victor.

"I'd make a case out of my grandmother if as much hinged on her as swings on this question of your mother's honesty. You can't blink these charges, Vic, they'll have to be met if she remains in the city."

Victor sat in silence for a few moments, then broke out again. "Gil, I begin to understand a hundred things that have always seemed queer to me. She has kept me away from her because she *knew* I would not sanction her way of earning money. Why, I haven't slept in her house but once since I was ten years old, and that was just before I entered here. I hated where she lived; it was a ratty little hole down on the south side, and the people with her were sloppy Sals. I refused to stay a second night. I can see it all now. She was living there in that way to save money for me, to keep me here. She wanted me to have just as good a chance as any of the rest of you. This room, the clothes I have on, my trinkets, everything came from her, and now there's no telling what may happen to her. That article threatens all kinds of persecution. I ought to be there this minute. I must take the very next train."

"I guess you're right there, old man. It's likely to be a pretty exciting day for her. This article is apt to bring all kinds of trouble to her as well as to you."

The news that Victor Ollnee was the son of a notorious medium ran rapidly among his classmates, and while they honored him and prized his skill on the team, they felt a certain resentment toward him. Some of them thought he had not been quite honest with them, and a violent controversy was thundering in the dining-room as Frenson re-entered it at one o'clock. He took Victor's part, of course. "He can't help what his mother's done," he argued. "He didn't choose his mother. Why slam into Vic?"

"We aren't slamming into him. We're sorry for him," responded one of the fellows.

"But we don't see how we can afford to have him in the frat," said another. "He's a ripping good fellow and a wonder at the bat, but what can we do? He should have told us about himself. The paper here says that his mother makes a living by cheating people, by tapping spirit wires and blowing horns and hearing voices in the dark: and all that shady business is sure to reflect on us. He's a marked man which ever way you look at it. You'll see everybody rubber-necking over our fence to-day. They've begun it already."

"That's so," agreed a third man. "Why didn't he tell us the truth before we voted him in here?"

Frenson explained. "He's been telling me all about it. He says he didn't know his mother was earning her money that way."

"That's the part that looks queer to us," accused the opposition. "How could he help knowing it? Looks to us as if he'd been covering it up all along. This writer says the woman is a regular 'battle-ax.'"

The current was setting strongly against Victor, and Frenson, seeing this, rose to go. "Well, there's no need of taking action. Poor Vic is heart-broken over the whole business and is leaving on the three-o'clock train."

This silenced even his critics. They began to remember what a jolly good fellow he was, and how important his work in "the diamond" had been. It was all very sad business, and they relented. "We don't want to be hard on him," they said.

Frenson went up to Victor. "See here, Captain, you must be hungry. I'll push a tray for you if you don't feel like going down among those 'Indians.' I'll have to be honest with you. They're all up in the air down there and howling something fierce. I reckon I'd better hustle a turkey-leg for you."

"I wish you would, Gil. I can't bear to see any one but you. If I can, I want to sneak out and get to the train without catching anybody's eye. All I need now is to kill that reporter. He has smashed my world, sure thing, and I may find my poor little mother crushed under it, too." He tore the paper into little bits, snarling through his set teeth. "The fellows may believe what they please. I've done with them all. They're all against me but you, I can see that."

Frenson got out his pipe and filled it while his partner raged up and down the room. At last he said: "Now, Vickie, when you get calmed down you just remember that you've a lot of mighty good friends up here. There'll be dozens of them that this thing won't change a little bit. They'll talk, but they'll be sympathetic."

Victor's wrath burned itself out at last, and he consented to Frenson's bringing the tray of food. But he declined to go down-stairs till the time came to start for the train.

As they were crossing the hall they met little Macey, who, with a startled look in his eyes, intercepted Victor's passage. "I'm awfully sorry, Vic," he began. "I wish I could do something for you."

There was something so sincere and moving in his tone that Victor's stern mood melted. His voice grew husky as he tried to jocularly reply. "Never mind, Sissy, I'm down, but I'm not out. Good-by till next time."

"That's the spirit," cheered Frenson from the doorway.

Out on the walk a couple of the older fraternity men stood talking in low voices (of Victor, of course), and as they fell apart one of them had the grace to say: "Don't stay away too long, Vic. We'll need you Saturday."

Victor waved a hand. "I hope you'll be here when I return," he retorted; but as he entered the hack (which Frenson had provided, as though he were taking an invalid or a lady to the train) his composure utterly gave way. "I could have stood it if the boys hadn't welched," he sobbed. "But they did; you can't fool me. They threw me down hard."

"Some of them did," admitted Frenson. "But they were the hollow ones. The solid chaps are all right yet."

"I can't blame them very much. If they believe all that stuff about my mother and think that I knew it, why of course they're right in feeling as they do."

At the train the loyal Frenson said, "Well now, Vic, if you need help any time you let me know and I'll come galloping."

"That's real bold in you, Gil, and if I get where I can't see my way out I'll shout."

And so they parted – Victor with a feeling that their companionship was ended forever, Gilbert with a sense of having failed of his intent to comfort and sustain.

II

VICTOR INTERROGATES HIS MOTHER

Once on the train, with the towers of the university building out of sight, Victor's mind went forward toward the great city whereto he was now hurrying in the spirit of one about to enter a tiger-haunted jungle. Hitherto he had been unafraid of its tumult, for there his mother lived. Her home, vague of outline as it was, offered refuge from the thunder and the shouting. But now its shelter was worse than useless, for its lintel was marked with a sign of shame and terror, and this the law and the lawless knew equally well.

"How will she seem to me now," he asked himself. "What will she say to me when we meet?"

On one point he was sternly resolved. "She must leave the city at once. We will go West somewhere. I will earn our living now." And at the moment earning a living seemed easy.

The close of a beautiful spring day was spreading over the town as he made his way up the stairway into the unwonted silence of the thoroughfare. The wind was from the east, clean and cool and sweet. As he looked down at the river from the bridge and marked its water flowing swiftly from the lake toward the splendid sunset sky he exulted over the power of man, of science, to reverse the natural current of a stream. "So must I change the whole course of my mother's life," he thought with returning resolution. "It must be done. It can be done. It's all in the will."

The hit-or-miss squalor of California Avenue filled him with renewed and augmented disgust as he descended from the car at the corner and began his search for his mother's apartment, which was the top story of a shabby wooden building standing between two shops. The stairway reeked with associations of poverty, a shifty poverty, and Victor's gorge rose at it. The second flight, though cleaner, was musty with decaying wood, and the doorway – on which a dim card was tacked – sadly needed paint. He began to realize sharply the sacrifices which had enabled him to live in the care-free comfort of his chapter-house, and his heart softened.

After knocking twice without obtaining a response he tried the knob. It yielded and he went in. All was silent and dim. For an instant he hesitated. "Perhaps I'm in the wrong pew after all," he thought; but as he looked about him he recognized the ghost-room furniture of his boyhood. On the wall was a familiar picture – the crayon portrait of a black-whiskered man. The same old battered walnut table which he remembered so well occupied one corner, and behind it three long tin cones stood upright on their larger ends. He shivered with disgust at them and turned to the lounge, over which, scattered as if by a gale of wind, lay the leaves of the hated Sunday edition of the *Star*. All else was neat and tidy, though threadbare with use. It was, indeed, very far from being "the gilded den of vice" which the reporter had depicted.

Oppressed by the silence, Victor called out, "Mother, are you here?"

He thought he heard a voice, a husky whisper, say, "*Go to her*"; and, a little surprised by this, he stepped to the door of the bedroom and peered in. There, sitting in an arm-chair, half hid in the gloaming, sat his mother with closed eyes and a gray-white face.

"Mother, are you sick?" he cried out, starting toward her.

Again the whisper in the air close to his ear commanded him: "*Stay where you are. Do not touch her.*"

"Mother, don't you know me? It is Victor."

The whisper answered: "*Your mother is resting. We are treating her. Be patient; she will awaken soon.*"

For a moment Victor's heart failed him, so impressive was this whisper, issuing apparently from the empty air. Then a flood of rage swept over him. This Voice was one of the tricks charged against her by the paper. "Mother, stop that! I won't have it. Do you hear me? Stop it, I say!"

The sleeper stirred and her eyes opened, but no sign of recognition was in them. Slowly her stiffened hands withdrew from the arms of her chair and clasped themselves in her lap. Her cheeks, puffed and pallid, were rigid and her eyes, turned upward and inward, gleamed coldly. The lids were half-closed. She had a horribly unfamiliar, tortured look, and he started toward her, calling upon her in a voice of anxiety. "Mother, what is the matter? Don't you hear me?"

At last she opened her eyes and a thrill of relief ran through him as he caught a gleam of recognition there. She lifted her hands feebly, whispering, "My boy, my precious boy!"

Kneeling by her side, he waited for her consciousness to come back. Her hands, so cold and nerveless, grew warmer, her lips smiled wearily, yet with divine maternal tenderness, and at last she spoke. "My big, splendid boy! I knew you would not desert me. I knew it; I knew it. I prayed for you."

"I came by the very first train," he answered, "and I am here to defend you."

A loud knocking at the door startled her and she clasped his hand tightly as she whispered: "That is another of my enemies. All day they have been coming. Send them away."

He put her hands down and rose tensely. "I'll smash their faces," he hotly declared.

"Don't be rash, Victor, please."

He strode to the door and opened it. A dark, handsome young woman and a grinning youth stood without. They were both a little dashed by Victor's appearance as he queried, with scowling brow, "What do you want?"

The man replied, "We came to have a sitting."

Victor exploded. "Get out," he shouted. "If you come back here again I'll throw you down the stairs." Thereupon he slammed the door in their faces and returned to his mother.

"We've got to get away from here," he said as he came to her. "We can't stay here another day."

"That must be as my guide, your grandfather, says," she replied.

"There's no use talking like that to me, mother. You've got to stop this business. I won't have any more of it. It's shameful, and I won't have it."

She answered, gently: "I'm under orders, Victor. I can do nothing in opposition to The Voices."

He bent over her with knitted brow. "See here, mother, I want you to understand that this medium business has got to be cut out. Look what it has let you in for! I don't believe in your Voices, and you must – "

She stopped him. "My son, if you do not believe in The Voices you cannot believe in me. They are real. If they were not, I should go mad. They are in my ears all day long. My comfort is that they are not imaginary. Others hear them, and that proves to me that they are not an illusion. If you listen they will speak to you."

"I don't want them to speak to me. I want you to pack up – "

"Hark!" she commanded. "They are speaking now."

As he listened, the same measured whisper which he had heard upon entering the house made itself distinctly heard, apparently in the air, a little higher than his mother's head. "*Boy, trust in us!*"

Victor glanced at his mother's lips. He could not help it; base as it seemed, he suspected her of ventriloquism. "Who are you?" he asked.

"*Your grandsire, Nelson Blodgett.*"

This reply, apparently without his mother's agency, was uttered in so plain a tone that Victor's hair rose. He opened and peered into a little closet which stood behind his mother's chair. It was empty, and as he came slowly back and stood looking down into her face a low, breathy chuckle sounded in his ear.

"*A smart lad. Needs discipline.*"

A flush of rage passed over him, leaving him cold. He studied his mother in silence, convinced that she was cunningly playing upon his fears. As he pondered she said, quietly: "I'm glad you came, Victor. You fill my heart with joy; but you must not stay. I do not need you. You must go back to your studies."

"That I cannot do."

"Oh, Victor, you must! I want you to graduate. Father insists on it."

"I tell you it is impossible. Do you suppose I'm going back there where all the fellows are laughing at me? Why, they're talking of throwing me out of the club! More than that, I can't take another cent of your money. If I had known how you were earning your living I would never have entered the university at all."

"Oh, my boy, do you doubt me? Do you believe what they say against me?"

This brought him face to face with the whole problem. "Of course I don't believe that you cheat – purposely – but I do think you are abnormal. You can't expect me to believe that a voice can come out of the air like that. It's impossible! It's against all reason, and yet –"

At this moment another knock, a gentler signal, sounded at the door, and the youth, relieved by the interruption, flared out at the unknown intruder. "Go away," he shouted.

"No, no; these are friends," his mother asserted, and rose to let them in.

Victor caught her by the arm. "What are you going to do?"

"Open the door. It is one of my dearest friends."

"You must not give a sitting. I won't have it."

The knock was repeated and she hurried away, leaving the boy confused, angry, and helpless.

She returned, accompanied by two women. The first of them was a diminutive, gray-haired lady, with a frank and smiling face, whose dress proclaimed a prosperous and happy station in life. Her companion was a tall young girl, whose spring suit, quiet in color and exquisitely tailored, became her notably. The youth thought, "What a stylish girl!" And the sight of her calmed him instantly.

"Victor," said his mother, and her tone was one of relief, "these are my dearest friends, Mrs. Joyce and Leonora Wood, her niece."

Victor bowed without speaking, for the heart of battle was still in him.

Mrs. Joyce cried out: "What a fine, big fellow! I didn't expect such a stalwart son."

"Please be seated," said Mrs. Ollnee. "My son has just arrived. He saw that dreadful article in the paper and came to defend me."

"That was fine of you," exclaimed Mrs. Joyce to Victor. "That same article brought us. I would have been here before only we don't take the *Star*, and I did not see the article until about an hour ago."

Mrs. Ollnee took up her explanation. "But, Louise, Victor says he will not go back to college."

Mrs. Joyce was quick to apprehend the situation. "I suppose that outrageous article made it appear necessary for you to defend both your mother and yourself," she said, searchingly.

Victor was not disposed to gloze matters in the least. "It made a fool of me," he responded, bitterly. "It made it impossible for me to look my friends in the face. How could I convince them that I was not sharing in the profits of my mother's business? I told them I didn't know where my allowance came from, but of course no one believed me. I know now, and I despise the whole business. I've come down here to take my mother out of it."

The three women looked at one another sympathetically. Mrs. Joyce, who knew Mrs. Ollnee's history intimately, only smiled as she answered: "I don't see that you need to feel ashamed of your mother's profession. A medium is one of the most precious instruments in this world. She brings solace to many a sorrowing heart. Why is her work less honorable than singing, for example? Furthermore, no one is obliged to come to her. We sit of our own choice, and if we are not pleased we can refuse to pay, and we need not return. So you see it is a free contract, after all."

Her reasoning staggered Victor. He was confused also by her frank and charming manner. He perceived that his problem was not so simple as he had imagined. Hitherto, his life had been single-hearted, with nothing more difficult to decide than a question of moral philosophy; but here, now, he stood confronted by an entirely baffling entanglement of human wills. This woman, so evidently of the higher world of wealth and culture, accepted his mother's claims, and this profoundly impressed him.

Mrs. Joyce continued. "Don't take this newspaper attack too seriously, Mr. Ollnee. It was meant to be nasty, and it *is* nasty; but it is not fatal. It is a cloud that will soon blow over and leave you and your mother unharmed."

"It will never blow over for me," he replied, passionately, "and you must not include me in this thing. I've lived a long way from it thus far, and I don't intend to mix up with this kind of hokus-pokus."

"Victor," called his mother, warningly.

He corrected himself. "Of course I don't accuse you of wilfully deceiving anybody. I'm willing to grant that you *think* these Voices are real; but my teacher, Doctor Boyden, says that mediumship is only a kind of hysteria – "

Mrs. Joyce laughed. "Yes, I've read Doctor Boyden's books. What does he know about it? Did he ever study a wonderful psychic like your mother? Has he candidly examined these phenomena? Never in his life! I know all about that kind of investigator. He is basing his conclusions on somebody's else's conjectures or prejudices."

Victor defended his master. "He has tried to experiment. He's offered prizes for mediums to meet him, but they have refused. Not one would sit with him."

"Why should they? Would you have your mother seek him out to convince him? Why doesn't he come to her. There he sits in his chair, pretending to say that these phenomena are impossible, whereas I know, from many personal tests, that these voices are not merely real, but that they come from my dear ones on the other side and that they sustain and comfort me."

Victor was silenced, and his discomfiture was made the more complete by the smiling gaze of the young girl, who was evidently enjoying his perplexity. Nevertheless, though he did not continue the argument, he held to his opinion that they were all victims of his mother's unconscious necromancy.

Mrs. Joyce continued. "You say you know nothing about it. Why not find out something about it? Here is your mother. Study her."

"Why don't we have a sitting now?" exclaimed Miss Wood. "It would be fun to see his face when the horns began to dance about."

Mrs. Ollnee looked a little worried. "Not now, Leo, I'm too upset. It's been a terrible day for me. I haven't eaten a thing."

Mrs. Joyce rose. "You poor dear! Let's go get something. Come this instant. You'll go, Mr. Ollnee."

His first impulse was to refuse, but as he studied his mother's pale face and thought of the good effect of the outside air he relented. "Yes, I'll go," he replied, ungraciously.

Miss Wood came over to him and tried to soften his mood. "I know how you feel about all this, and I know how brutal a scientific sharp can be. My professors were all against it. Just the same, it's a wonderful old world; a good deal more wonderful than some of our teachers admit."

He did not reply to this, but stood watching his mother as she put on her hat and wrap. Her whole expression had changed. Her face had lighted up and her delicacy of feature and small, graceful hands denoted to him as never before the woman of natural refinement and intelligence. It was hard to consider her at the moment the victim of a brain disorder, and yet —

Mrs. Joyce led the way down the creaking stairs, and Victor, following in sullen silence, was surprised and a little daunted to find a luxurious automobile waiting for them. He rebelled at the curb. "You go on without me," he said, harshly. "I'll stay here till you come back."

"Oh no," exclaimed Mrs. Joyce. "Please come with us. Your mother will not be happy without you."

Miss Wood remarked, humorously, "Never refuse a dinner or a ride in a motor-car; that's my motto."

His mother timidly lifted her face. "Victor, Mrs. Joyce is my most loyal friend. I owe her more than you know. I *wish* you would come."

He yielded with a sense of stepping down, but as he found himself seated beside Miss Wood and whirring swiftly up the street his inflexible attitude softened. "For this one night I will follow; after that I lead," he promised himself.

The girl mocked him with subtle intonation. "I am glad of any mystery and romance which remains in this old world, and I never quarrel with fate. If any one is disposed to exchange an autocar ride for so intangible a thing as a voice, I trade."

A little later she reverted to his problem. "What right have you to pass judgment on your mother without examining her? I was just as skeptical as you are when I met her first, but she *forced* me to believe. I am perfectly certain that she would upset Doctor Boyden. If he would come down quietly and sit with her she'd convince even him. She is a very dear little woman, and we all love her."

Mrs. Joyce leaned over and spoke in his ear. "It is only through devoted beings like your mother that the bereaved are assured of life everlasting. She doesn't *tell* me that my son is living beyond the veil; *she brings him to me*. I hear his voice and touch his hand."

To this sort of thing he was forced to listen during their course down the shining avenue, and it made the whole city as unreal as a dream. When they rolled up to the wide portals of a towering hotel a new anxiety presented itself. "Suppose mother should be recognized as we enter? Suppose they arrest her here."

A realization of his own poverty and youth and general helplessness came over him with crushing effect as he trod the hall, which seemed very vast and splendid in his eyes. He was subdued, too, by the thought that he had not silver enough in his pocket to fee the girl who took their wraps. His resolution to fight, to earn not only his own living but to rescue his mother, became fainter each moment. "Can it be that yesterday I was behind the bat?" he asked himself. "Surely I must be dreaming."

He perceived another side to his mother's character. She seemed quite at ease amid all this splendor, and accepted whatever Mrs. Joyce did for her as something quite definitely her due.

There was no indication of the Sabbath in the gorgeous dining-room, and nothing to show that sorrow or poverty existed in the world; and seeing his mother's face flushed with pleasure, the perplexed youth relented a little further. "This one night she may have, but it must be the last of such entertainment on such terms."

There was in him beneath all this antagonism a kind of dignity and manly strength which pleased Mrs. Joyce. She was glad to see him lighten up, and she exerted herself to that end. "There now," she said, looking about the room. "Let's forget all of our troubles. Let us suppose that all our friends 'on the other side' are at dinner also."

Victor sat in silence what time his mother decided whether she would have asparagus soup or consommé. It was his first experience with that degree of wealth which takes no thought of price, and glancing at the figures on the bill of fare his hair rose. Never in his life had he eaten a meal which cost as much as this one order of soup, and the fact that his mother gaily ordered the best indicated to him how deeply indebted she already was to her patroness. "There must be some very definite need which she supplies," he conceded, "or Mrs. Joyce would not so gladly pay her bills."

At the same time his respect and admiration for his mother returned. As the dinner went on her cheeks glowed with faint color. Her years of trouble seemed to slip away from her. She took on youthful grace and charm, glancing often at her handsome son with eyes of maternal pride and content. "It is so good to have you here," she silently expressed. He had never seen this care-free side of her, and the gayer she grew the more alien, in a sense, she became. She was instinctively the lady, of that he was assured, and though she could not follow Miss Wood in all of her flights of fancy and allusion, she plainly showed unusual powers of appreciation.

The talk also brought out the extraordinary intimacy of the three women. It appeared that Mrs. Joyce and Mrs. Ollnee were inseparable, that she often took his mother to the opera and to the theater, and as they discussed various singers and actors, whose names alone he knew, his sense of being

suburban deepened. "Why does this vivid and cultured woman seek my mother's society? For what reason does she lavish money upon her? Is it because of her personal charm? No," he decided, "that cannot be the reason." Beneath her cordial tone he thought he detected the reserve of one who is being kind to a dependent. "She's being nice to mother," he concluded, "because she thinks she's getting something special from her. Mother is a freak, not a friend. She considers her a kind of spiritual telephone."

Although Miss Wood devoted herself to the task of amusing him, and his face lost some of its gravest lines, yet he could not be denoted a careless youth, even when the wine came on. He was thinking too deeply to be outwardly ready of retort. It was too sudden a change from the pastoral air and quiet streets of Winona to be instantly assimilated. He remained sullen.

His mother eyed him apprehensively but admiringly. "He looks like his father," she whispered to Mrs. Joyce.

He would have been inhuman had he not responded to certain charms in Miss Wood. She had a fine profile, he admitted, finer than that of any girl he knew. Her eyes, too, were a little disturbing by reason of the small wrinkles of laughter at the corners, but she irritated him. She was perfectly sure of herself. Nothing that he did or failed to do affected her in any other way apparently than to deepen her amusement. Her manner seemed to say, "Wait a few days and see what a fool you'll find yourself out to be. You're nothing but a great big country lad, trying to be a philosopher, trying to live up to a rigid code of morals. It's all a pose, a ludicrous attitude of boyish defiance."

She said nothing of this of course; on the contrary, she talked of things in which he was interested, trying politely to meet him half way. She was actually a year or two younger than he, but she gave off the air of being five years older. She had explored immense tracts of human life, or at least of social life, of which he had no knowledge, and this came out in her casual references to New York and Paris. Her home was in Los Angeles, but she was now staying with her aunt.

He lost his sullen reserve. The soup, the wine, the bird, and the maid softened his stern mood. By the time the coffee came on he was talking almost boyishly with his hostess and his face had lost its troubled lines.

His perplexities came back as Mrs. Joyce passed two bills to the waiter in payment for their dinner, and he watched from the corner of his eye to see how much change came back. Two dollars! Eighteen dollars for four dinners! "Great Scot!" he inwardly groaned. "It would take me a week to earn our share of this meal!" And a returning sense of his mother's subconscious iniquity reclad him with gloom.

The ride back to California Avenue was less festive, for Mrs. Joyce took occasion to say: "My advice is this. Return to college and obtain your degree. I will take care of your dear little mother."

"I can't do that," he said. "I've quit. There is no use talking about that."

"You shouldn't take this newspaper attack too seriously," remarked Miss Wood. "Reporters are always exposing mediums. It is quite habitual with them, and besides, your mother has been through it before."

"Is that true?" he asked, with sharpened assault.

"Yes," Mrs. Ollnee admitted. "I've been attacked in this way twice."

"Since I have been grown up?"

"Yes; once since you went to Winona."

"I didn't know that. Why didn't you tell me?"

Mrs. Joyce interposed. "What was the use? You could have done nothing. We who understand these matters make allowances for the reporter's trade. He must earn a living some way."

As she said this Victor recalled the cynical close of the article. "Probably the true-blue believer will condemn the detective and not the culprit," the lines ran. "There are dupes so purblind, so infatuated that nothing, not even the boldest chicanery can shake their faith; nevertheless, a few will take this article for what it is, a full and clear exposé of a shrewd and conscienceless trickster." And

yet, as he faced these intelligent women, Victor could not think of them as being deceived by open chicanery, much less could he admit for a moment that his mother was capable of resorting to it.

It was a dramatic and moving experience for him to go from this cushioned, splendid chariot back to the shabby little apartment which was the only home in the wide world for either his mother or himself. He was filled with a kind of rage at her, at fate, and at himself, and no sooner were they inside the door than he turned upon her with a note of resentful resolution in his voice.

"Mother, how could you let me in for all of this? Why did you send me to college, knowing that sooner or later exposure must come?"

"I trusted the voices," she replied, "just as I must continue to trust them in the future."

"Now, mother," he rejoined with a certain foreboding grimness of inflection, "we've got to get right down to brass tacks on that business. I can't go on any longer in ignorance of who I am and what you are. I want to know all about you and all about my father. Who was my father? What was he? Did he believe in this thing?"

Her eyes fell. "No, not while he was on this life's plane. Indeed, it was my 'work' that – that separated us. He hated it and was very harsh about it. But the first thing he did after he passed on was to come back and tell me that I was right after all. He asked me to forgive him."

"Is that his picture up there on the wall? What did he do for a living?"

"He was a really fine mind, Victor; one of those men who might have been eminent had they gone out into the world. He was a student and a thinker, but he was not ambitious. He was content to be the principal of a village school and live quietly; and we were very happy till The Voices began."

"Did he know you had The Voices when he married you?"

"Yes, I told him all about them, but he only laughed at me. I suppose he thought it was just a fancy on my part. Anyhow, he did not take them seriously, and during our courtship they gave me freedom. My guide said I need not sit for a while and father guarded me from all the evil ones on that side who are so ready to rush in and take possession of a medium. For two years I had no touch of 'the power,' and I really thought it had all gone away from me. Then you came and I was very ill, and father, my control, returned to tell me that you would be a great man. 'Hereafter,' he said, 'I will direct you in the education of your son.' Why, Victor, he named you. He said you should be called Victor because you would overcome all opposition."

"Well, just how did your separation come about?"

"When my control began to demand things from me your father accused me of playing tricks and sternly forbade any more of it. I tried not to go into trance. I fought 'the power' and this angered father. He came upon me so strong that I could do nothing with him. I heard The Voices all the time and your father thought me crazy. I had what seemed like epileptic fits. I seemed to lose my identity – but I didn't; I knew all that was going on. It seemed as if I went out of my body while others entered it and used it to torment and perplex your father. Then he became convinced that I was abnormal in some way and experimented with me – all in a very skeptical spirit – and gradually he lost his regard for me. I became only 'a case of hysteria' to him. I could see him change from day to day. He grew colder and more critical and more aloof all the time. This made me so ill that I was unable to keep my feet – I grew old rapidly, and another younger and prettier woman, one of his teachers, gained the love I had lost and at last he went away with her."

There was a little silence before Victor was able to ask, "Where did he go?"

"He went to Denver, and I never saw him again. He died not long after."

"Then did you take to making a living out of the ghost-room?"

"After your father left I asked my guides why they permitted him to leave me, and they said it was considered necessary to keep me in 'the work.' 'You were too happy,' they said. 'You are too valuable an instrument to live out your life simply as wife and mother. You are now to be devoted to higher aims.' Since then whenever I have tried to get out of 'the work' they have brought me back. Oh, you don't know what a clutch they have on me. They know my income to a dollar. They let me

have just enough to live on and to educate you, but they won't let my rich friends provide me with an income. I must do their will exactly or they punish me."

As she enlarged upon this phase of her life Victor was appalled by it. Her madness – and madness it seemed to him – was now a settled and specific part of her life. "How do they punish you?" he asked, after a pause.

"They do not hesitate to throw me into convulsions, or make me do things that rob me of my friends. They bring disaster upon me whenever I try to walk my own road. Every investment I make on my own judgment they defeat. Did you ever plague an ant or a bug by putting something in its way, checking its advance, no matter in which direction it went?"

He nodded. "Yes, I've done that as a boy."

"Well, that is exactly how they treat me. I've given up trying to do anything in opposition to their wishes. I do the work that is laid out for me." She sighed. "Yes, I've ceased to rebel. I am resigned. But, Victor, you must not fail me. I shall be perfectly happy if only you will be content to go with me and to grant at least that the work I am doing is worth while. You're all I have now, and when I see you frowning at me, so like your father, I am scared. That black look is on your face this moment."

"You need not be afraid of me, mother," he replied, wearily; "but you must not ask me to believe in your voices and all the rest of it. It's too unnatural and too foolish. But you're my good little mother all the same, and I'm not going to desert you. I'm going to stay right here and help you fight it out."

She took his words to mean something sweet and filial and went to his arms with happiness.

As she lifted her head from his shoulder he looked round the room and said, "But, mother, this ghost-room has got to go."

"Oh, Victor, don't say that. I am ready to promise not to take money for my work, but I can't promise anything further; and as for my ghost-room, as you call it, it has so many associations with Paul and your grandfather that I cannot think of giving it up. I dare not give it up."

"You must quit it," he repeated. "If you give another séance – for money – I will leave you and I will never come back." And on his face was the stubborn look of his father.

III

VICTOR MAKES A TEST

That night was a long and restless one for the mother, but the son, with the healthy boy's power of forgetfulness, slept dreamlessly, waking only when the morning light struck beneath his eyelids. For a moment the thunder of the elevated trains in the alley puzzled him, and he rose dazedly on his elbow expecting to catch Frenson at some practical joke, but as his eyes took in the faded carpet, the cheap curtains, the decrepit furniture, his brain cleared and his beleaguering worries came back upon him like a swarm of vultures.

He recalled the terror of his mother's trance, the coming of her lovely friends, the ride, the luxurious dinner, and, last of all, the significant words with which they had parted.

In the light of the day his situation did not seem so complicated. "We must leave this city and go out West somewhere – get shut of the whole bunch. Father was right – this trance business is intolerable."

His natural vigor and decision returned to him. He rose with a bound, calling to his mother with a realization of the fact that she had no cook. "Who gets breakfast, you or I?"

She replied, with a little flutter of dismay in her voice, "I don't believe there is a crumb of bread in the house."

"Never mind," he replied; "I'll go to the corner and negotiate a roll."

The neighborhood did not improve with daylight acquaintance, and on his way back from the shop with a jug of cream and a paper bag in his hands he dwelt again upon his motor-car ride to the Palace Hotel and reviewed the eighteen-dollar meal they had eaten. He possessed sufficient sense of humor to grin as he clutched his parcels. "If Miss Wood were to see me now she'd experience a jolt."

His smile did not last long. "Mrs. Joyce knows all about us," he admitted. "That's why she blew us to that feast. She was trying to compensate mother for her empty cupboard, which was very nice of her." Then his thought went deeper. He began to understand that it was to provide him with a larger allowance that his mother had been living alone and doing her own work. "Dear little mutter!" he said, and his heart softened toward her. "She's been walking the tight-rope, all right."

She was up and at work in the tiny kitchen as he came in. "I forgot to get my supplies Saturday – and yesterday I was so upset –"

"Never mind," he replied, gaily. "The 'royal gorge' we had last night makes breakfast supererogatory. I've attached some rolls and a bottle of cream, and if you've any coffee and sugar we're fixed."

"I have sugar but no coffee. I drink –"

"Not on your life!" he cut in. "No burnt wheat for me!" And he tore down the stairs like mad.

At the shop he found himself possessed of just seventeen cents, with which he bought a half-pound of coffee.

"Now I can begin my conquest of the world as all the great men have done – penniless. It's me for a stroll down-town, I reckon."

The table was neatly set when he returned, and his mother, proud of her big and glowing boy, cheerily confronted him. "No matter how poor we are," she said, "we can be happy." And with her faith renewed she prepared the coffee for the cream.

The sun struck into the bare little dining-room with golden charm, but these two souls, so alike yet so unlike, faced each other with returning constraint. As they talked their antagonism of purpose again developed.

Victor outlined his plan of going West and starting anew. To this suggestion his mother listened, then gently replied: "There are many objections to that, Victor. First of all, I have no money."

"Can't we sell something?" She shook her head, and he, after looking around, ruefully admitted that there was nothing to sell. "But your house – " This gave him a thought. "Why don't we go back to La Crescent? I'll work on a farm, in a grocery – anything rather than have you keep on with this business. It's dangerous, and it isn't nice."

"Victor," she began, with more of self-assertion than she had hitherto voiced, "you don't understand. My mediumship is not a business, it is a sacred obligation. God has gifted me with the power of communicating with those who have passed to a higher plane, and I must respect that gift. I am in the hands of those wiser than either of us. To oppose them would be self-destruction."

He listened with growing coldness and hardness. "That's all a delusion," he repeated. "Modern science has proved that mediumship is just plain hysteria."

"We won't argue," she replied, and her tone was that of one hurt. "I *know*, for I have had the personal experience. I am only a leaf in the wind when this power sweeps over me. So long as I live I must remain the instrument of these our supernal friends – it is my work in the world, and I must execute it."

"What do you expect me to do?" he asked, almost brutally.

"I'd like you to go back to your studies – "

"That I will not do," he assured her in tones that expressed a final decision.

"Well then – will you remain here with me?"

"Not with you carrying on the business which I hate."

"Why should you hate it? To Leo and Mrs. Joyce my mission is noble."

"I hate it because I think it's foolish, unnatural, and false. I don't mean that you *consciously* cheat, mother, but I am certain that in some way it all comes down to that."

She opened her arms in a gesture of passionate appeal. "My son, these Voices have educated you – they have helped me to feed and clothe you. Now here I am, prove me, try me, convict me if you can. I yield myself to your tests. I *know* the spirit life is a reality. If I did not I should perish with despair. Every day, almost all hours of the day, these Voices whisper in my ears. The hands of those you call the dead caress my cheek. They cheer and admonish me. They are as real to me as you are. If you can silence them, do so. I put myself into your hands. Do what you will in proof of my powers."

The boy was rapidly changing to the man. His mother's words beating upon his brain aroused something in him which he had not hitherto acknowledged. He thought deeply as he peered into her eyes, burning with resolution.

"She is honest – but she is the victim of a fixed idea." He had heard much of "the fixed idea." "I will try her, I will rid her of her obsession." Aloud he said: "The important thing is our living. How am I to pay my way? I haven't a cent. I paid out my last penny for this coffee."

"I have a little money."

"I told you I wouldn't take another dollar of your money, and I won't," he replied, sharply. "That's settled. I must get clear and keep clear of all this 'bunk.'"

"But suppose you find my powers real?" she asked, trembling with eagerness.

He hesitated. "Then – well – if I believed in your powers I would still object to your earning money with – by means of your – your Voices. I've got to make my own way in the world, and from this moment!"

She read an unmitigable opposition in his eyes and sadly said, "You'll come here to sleep, won't you?"

He conceded so much, though reluctantly. "Yes, I'll sleep here, but as soon as I make a raise of any work I intend to pay for my board. As for carfare, I guess my junk will have to go into 'hock.'" He rose. "You see, I won a silver mug and a watch by being useful to the team. It's them to 'Uncle Jake's,'" he ended, with a return to the college youth's vocabulary, and going to his valise took out his reward for muscular merit and showed it to her. "Isn't that smooth?"

Her eyes shone with pride. "How much do you suppose you can borrow on it?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Five dollars, maybe."

"Well, I'll lend you ten dollars on it."

He looked at her with musing eyes. "Say twenty, and you may have both mug and watch."

She went to her purse and handed to him the money.

He took it without hesitation. "Well, here's where I hit the pavement for a job."

She confronted him in a final appeal. "Oh, Victor, I can't bear to have you doubt me even for an hour. Stay with me to-day. Stay and let me talk with you. I've had so little of you. Just think! for more than twelve years I've kept you away from me – I've starved myself – my mother-self – in order that you might grow to manhood untroubled by my faith, and I can't bear to have you doubt me now."

He understood something of her emotion and responded to it. "You dear, faithful little mother, I realize now what I have cost you, and I'm grateful; but that's the very reason why I can't let you do any more of it. I must begin to pay you back."

"All you need to do to pay me is to let me look at you," she fondly replied. "I'm proud of you, Victor. I was proud of you last night. I saw Leo admiring you, and Mrs. Joyce thinks you are splendid."

He was interested. "By the way, who is Miss Wood?"

"She's a niece of Mrs. Joyce. Mrs. Joyce is the widow of Joyce the lumberman."

"She seems to have all kinds of money." His face was thoughtful again.

"Yes, she's rich, and she has been very kind to me. She took me to California and to Europe. She is always doing things for me. It was just like her to come to me yesterday – she is not one to fail in time of trouble. I don't know what I should do without her."

"She certainly is nice. What about Miss Wood? Does she believe in your – your Voices?" He asked this without direct glance.

"Yes. She doesn't say much, but she is deeply grateful to my guides."

"She's no ordinary girl, I can see that. Is she rich also?"

"Not as Mrs. Joyce is rich, but The Voices have sort of adopted her. They say they will make her wealthy as a queen."

"What do you mean by that?"

"They are telling her from week to week just how to invest her money."

"Do you mean to tell me that *you* advise her how to invest her money?"

"No, I mean *The Voices* advise her."

"Why should 'they' know anything about business?"

She became evasive. "They do! They've proved it again and again. Mrs. Joyce's income has doubled in five years by following father's advice."

He pondered on this deeply. "I don't like that. I don't see why you or your Voices should be valuable in that way."

"There are many things in this world for you to learn, my son," she replied with an assumption of superior wisdom.

This nettled him. "It don't take much wisdom to know that if you go on advising people in that way you'll get into trouble. That's what that writer said in the paper."

She closed her lips tightly as if to keep back a cutting reply, and he rose briskly. "Well, see here, we must put away these dishes."

She acquiesced in his postponement of the discussion, and helped him wash the dishes and set the room to rights. At last she said: "Where is the morning *Star*? Have you seen it?"

"There's a paper at the foot of the stairs; is that yours?"

"Yes," she replied.

"I'll get it," he said, and was out of the door and back again before she fully realized that he was gone. He opened the twist of damp paper with haste, fully expecting to find some new attack on "Mrs. Ollnee, the Blood-sucker," but there was nothing. "All the same, you're not safe in this house," he said. "They threatened to arrest you, and I don't like to leave you here alone to-day."

"You need not worry about me," she replied, quietly. "Father will take care of me. If he saw any real danger coming my way he would warn me of it."

"He didn't warn you of the coming of the reporter, did he?"

"No – he had some reason for permitting this cloud to come upon me. He knows best."

"I don't believe I'd put very much faith in 'guides' that didn't keep me out of trouble."

"Perhaps all this is a part of our discipline. They are wiser than we. I accept even this disgrace as a good in disguise. Perhaps it was all intended to bring you to me."

The youth sank back again baffled by this all-including acceptance. "What do you intend to do to-day?" he asked, as she rose and walked over to the little walnut table.

"I am going to ask for advice."

"Now?"

"Yes; and I wish you would sit with me for a few moments and see if we cannot secure direction for the day."

He was beginning to be curious – and his desire to dig deeper into his mother's brain overcame part of his repugnance.

"All right," he boyishly answered, but his heart contracted with sudden fear of finding her false. "Let's see what they're up to."

"Take a seat opposite me," she said, and there was something commanding in her voice.

Drawing a chair up to the old brown table – which he remembered as one of the pieces of furniture in his earliest childhood home – he took a seat.

"Why do you keep this rickety old thing?" he asked, shaking it viciously.

"It was your grandfather's reading-table, and he likes me to keep it. Besides, it is highly magnetized and very sensitive."

"Oh rats!" he irreverently burst forth. "You can't magnetize a piece of wood. Wood is a non-conductor. You can't subvert a physical law just by saying so."

"I don't mean it in that crude sense," she replied, quite mistress of herself. She had taken up and was holding between her hands a small hinged slate.

"What's that for?" asked Victor.

"To vitalize the surface. I am able to give it vitality by my touch." She laid the slate upon the table and placed her spread hand upon it. "Put your hand upon mine, Victor."

He did as she bade him, rebelling at the childish folly of it all. "What do you expect to do?" he asked.

Almost immediately the slate seemed seized by a powerful hand. It began to slide back and forth across the table violently, twisting and clattering. The youth put forth his own great strength and stopped it, but a crunching sound announced that the slate was broken.

His mother said, sharply, "You mustn't do that, Victor." She took up the slate and showed one corner crushed and crumbled. "You can't hold it – you mustn't try – it angers them."

He marveled at the strength which had resisted him, but argued that his mother from long practice had become very muscular. Hysterical people often displayed astounding power.

After preparing a new slate she put it on the table as before, saying to the air, "Please don't be rough, father – Victor can't prevent his skepticism."

Three loud raps answered, and she smiled. He says, "All right. He understands."

"Seems to me he's mighty touchy for one on the heavenly plane," Victor retorted, maliciously. "Seems to me an all-seeing spirit ought to get my point of view."

A vigorous tapping on the table responded to this speech.

"What's that?" asked Victor.

"That is your father saying yes, he *does* get your point of view."

Victor had a feeling that his mother was receding from him as he faced her across the table. She became the professional medium in her manner and tone. He, too, changed. He hardened, assuming

the attitude of the scientific observer – hostile and derisive. His keen hazel-gray eyes grew penetrating and his lips curled in scorn. His tone hurt her, but she persisted in her sitting, and at last the slate began to tremble throughout all its parts, and a grating sound like slow writing with a pencil went on beneath it. Victor could plainly follow the dotting of the i's and the crossing of the t's, till at the end a tapping indicated that it was finished.

"You may take the slate, Victor," said Mrs. Ollnee.

He took it from the table and opened it. On one side, in bold script – a bit old-fashioned – stood these words: "*Stay where you are. Let the boy adventure into the city. Await results. I will be near. FATHER.*"

Victor, astounded, mystified, confronted his mother with wide eyes. "Now, what does that mean?"

"It means that I am to keep this house just as it is and you are to seek work in the city. Is that right, Paul?"

Three taps made answer.

The youth was stunned by the boldness and cleverness of all this. He was pained, too. He perceived no sign of abnormal thinking in his mother's action. She was not hysterical. *She was not entranced.* Whatever she did she did consciously – and the thought that she could deliberately deceive him was shocking. He breathed quickly and a nervous clutch came into his hands. He resented being fooled. "Let's try that again," he said; and his tone was precisely that of the child who sees a grown person swallow a coin and take it out of his ear. He was angry as well as sad. "Don't put your hand on it," he protested. "I don't like the looks of that."

She submitted, and then as he was putting it down on the table the sound of writing was heard within it. He laid his hand on the slates, and still the writing went on! With amazement he realized that both her hands were in sight and in no wise concerned in the writing. The right rested lightly and quietly on the frame of the slate, but the left, which lay on the opposite corner of the table, was quivering throughout all its minute muscles.

Amazed beyond words, excited, breathing deep, with a shudder of nervous excitement running over his entire body, Victor listened to the mystic pencil. "How *do* you work that?" he asked, in a whisper.

"I don't know. I have nothing to do with it," she answered; and taking the upper hinge of the slate between her fingers and thumb she slowly raised it.

And still the writing went on!

Victor, holding his breath in awe, bent to look within, but as the opening grew wider the writing stopped.

He snatched the slates from the table and studied the lines, which were made up of minute dots. It was all perfectly legible: "*Son. I doubted. Now I know.*"

Victor sank back into his seat and stared speechlessly at the slate and the table. The problem of his mother's mediumship had taken on new elements of mystery. This physical test brought it into the range of his knowledge and interest. It was no longer a question of her honesty or sanity, it had become a problem in dynamics.

How was that bit of pencil moved? The messages he ignored – they didn't matter – but the method of their production seemed to eliminate all trickery, conscious or unconscious. Why did his mother's left hand quiver – and how could that writing shape itself?

His voice was husky with emotion as he said: "Mother, I don't understand that. You've got to tell me how that is done."

She felt the desperate resolution in his voice and she solemnly answered, "My son, I don't *know* how it is done."

"But you *must* know! Who moves that pencil! Your hand quivered all the time."

"Yes, I seem to have some physical connection with it – at times. Other times all that takes place has no more connection with me than the sunlight on the floor. The world is a very mysterious place to me, Victor. I don't pretend to know anything. I do as I am told."

He fell silent again while his mind reviewed the entire process. Then he burst out, vehemently, on a new line. "I can't believe my eyes. You've hypnotized me. Mother, for God's sake don't juggle with me – don't play tricks with me. I won't stand for it. It hurts me – " He paused, confused, baffled, ready to weep.

"Can you, my own son, accuse me of trickery?" she asked.

"You *think* you're honest, mother – but don't you see you've become an *unconscious hypnotist*? It's your subconscious self deceiving us both. I don't know how you do it, but I know it must be a fraud."

"Victor," she said, solemnly, "what this power is you shall have full opportunity to determine, but I say to you that for more than twenty years I've been guided by these unseen presences. I've tested their wisdom and lived under their care. So far as this message is concerned I accept it. I was confused and frightened yesterday, but this morning I am calm. I shall do as they bid. I shall stay here while you go down into the city and see what you can find to do, and together we will test these voices."

There was a ring of new-found decision in her tone that quite dashed him. He sat dumbly facing her, helpless in a whirl of mental storm. "Is she more cunning than I thought? Is she playing a more complex game than appears?" These thoughts vaguely shaped themselves. Then his filial self answered: "But what has she to gain? She loves me. She has sacrificed herself to keep me at school – why should she deceive me?"

Here again a third conception came to embitter him. He spoke. "You don't seem to mind my loss of a degree?"

"Yes, I do, Victor. I feel that very deeply, but the higher wisdom of your grandfather resigns me. I cannot tell what is behind it. By his power to read the future he may be preventing some terrible accident, some calamity by fire or water – I have an impression that it is something of that sort."

"No," came a whisper from the air.

She turned her face upward, and, listening intently, asked, "What is the reason, father?"

"*Discipline*," the whisper replied.

"He says 'discipline,' Victor."

"Discipline!" he echoed. "Why should I be disciplined? What have I done?"

"*It is not what you've done – it's what you are to do.*"

The Voice did not reply to further questions, and the silence gave out a kind of cold contempt, which cut the boy as he waited.

"Let's try that slate business again," he said at last. But to this his mother would not consent.

"It's of no use," she said. "They are gone. There is no 'power' present."

He again faced her with alien, accusing eyes. "When will you try this again?"

"To-night, when you come home."

"Home!" he sneered, looking about. "Do you expect me to call this place home? Do you expect me to hang about this scrubby hole to be disciplined by your Voices?"

The sound of a knock at the door gave her a moment's respite. "The postman," she explained as she rose to go to the door.

She was gone for several minutes and Victor heard her in friendly conversation with a pleasant male voice. Some way this added to his anger and disgust.

She came back with a letter in her hand which she began at once to open. "It is from Louise, I mean Mrs. Joyce."

She read it through with smiling face, then said, "Victor, you must be nice to Louise, she has done *everything* for us."

This brought him to his feet. "I understand all that now. It is *her* money I've been living on – I won't touch another cent that comes from her. Understand that! I won't eat another dinner that she pays for."

"Why, Victor, you should not feel that way! What has she done to make you bitter?"

"Nothing. I refuse to live on her charity, that's all, and I want you to find out just how much I owe her – how much *you* owe her – for I intend to pay her back every dollar with interest."

"But she considers I've already paid her. She feels that I have always given her bounteous return for all her aid."

"I don't figure it that way," he said. "She's just amusing herself –"

She interrupted. "Listen to what she says." She read: "I want to tell you how much I like your son. He is so vivid and so powerful. I'm sorry he is to miss his degree. Can't you persuade him to go back? I'll be glad to advance what is necessary –"

"There it is, you see! There's the rich lady helping a poor relation."

"Wait, son!" she pleaded, and read on. "I feel that I owe you ten times what you've permitted me to do for you."

"That's all very nice of her, mother, but I won't have any more of it." He pounded out the sentence with his fist.

She looked up at him with mingled fear and pride. "You are exactly like your father as you say that," she declared. "Oh, Victor, my son! If *you* leave me in anger I shall be desolate indeed. I can't live without you. Please believe in me – and love me – for you're all I have on this earth."

His anger died away. He saw her again as she really was, a pale, devoted little saint, with troubled brow and quivering lips, one who had shed her very life-blood for him – to doubt her became a monstrous cruelty.

He put his arms about her and hugged her close. "I didn't mean to hurt you, mother – but your world is so strange to me. I'll stay, I'll do the best I can here; only don't work this slate trick any more. Don't sit for any one but me. Will you promise that?"

"May I not sit for Louise?"

"Not without me."

"I dare not promise, Victor. Father may insist. If he does *not* insist I will do as you wish. I will give it up."

He kissed her. "Dear little mother, you sha'n't live alone any more, and you shall soon have a home that is worthy of you."

She was weeping, and a big lump in his own throat made speech difficult. To cover his emotion he slangily said: "Well, now, it's me to the marts of trade. Perhaps I'll fool The Voices yet."

IV

VICTOR THROWS DOWN THE ALTAR

"How do people get jobs," he asked himself as he set forth. "'Want ads,' I suppose." He went deeper. "What am I fitted for? I can keep books – in a fashion – or I can clerk. My training has not fitted me for any special thing, unless to sell sporting-goods." This was a "lead," and his face brightened. "My work on the team ought to help me in that direction. Good idea! I'll hie me to the sporting-goods houses."

The first two managers with whom he talked, while much impressed by him, were completely manned, but the third was disposed to consider him till he told him his name. "No relation to Mrs. Ollnee, the medium?" he asked, with a grin, while poised his pencil to write.

For an instant Victor hesitated, then took the leap. "Well, yes, I am, but then you don't want to believe that report; it's more than half a lie."

The manager's smile vanished. He left the address half finished. "So you are the son they spoke of?" he said, with a cold, keen glance.

"Yes, I am," Victor boldly answered.

He closed his book. "I don't believe we can trade," he announced. "Of course *I* don't consider all mediums frauds and liars, but this house is very particular about its help –"

Victor turned and walked away, bitterly rebellious of soul and disheartened. For a time his anger burned so hotly within him that he meditated taking the train and leaving the city and all it held behind him. Again and again his thought returned to the picture his gentle little mother had made as she had said good-by to him at the head of the stairs. To accuse her of conscious deception was like accusing a sweet girl of infanticide. How could she build up a system of fraudulent fortune-telling, so intricate, so subtle, that it baffled the eye of the reporter, who confessed that he had not been able to detect the trickery. "It is only by induction, by inference, that one gets at the *modus operandi*," he admitted.

In his perturbation he walked away to the east and soon came out upon the lake-front. A bunch of men and boys of all types and sizes were playing ball on the barren ground, and with the athlete's undying love of the sport he rose and edged into the game. He could not resist showing his prowess by means of a few curves, and the crowd with instant perception began to take a vivid interest in him.

A half-hour of this restored his good-nature and he returned to the cañons to the west, determined to find an opening somewhere. He was never dismissed rudely – he was too big and well-dressed for that – but the fact that he had no experience shut him out in most cases, and for the rest the departments were filled with salesmen. Twice when he seemed about to be taken on, his name and his mother's reputation shut the door of opportunity in his face.

At four o'clock he started slowly homeward, discouraged, not so much by his failure as by the fact that everybody seemed to have a knowledge of the article in the *Star*. It was evident that even when a manager did not at the moment make the connection between his name and Mrs. Ollnee's it would certainly come out later and he would be called upon to defend himself and his mother from the sneers and jeers of his fellow-salesmen. "I'm a marked man, that's sure," he said, in dismay.

All day his mind had dwelt in flashes on the glorious life at Winona, but now his memory of it was poisoned by the thought that he had been a pensioner on the bounty of Mrs. Joyce. "The easy thing would be to change my name and skip out for the plains," he said again, "but I won't. I'll stay and fight it out right here some way."

He was passing the public library at the moment and was moved to go in and look up the "want ads" in the papers. Ten minutes' reading of these filled him with despair. There were so many wanting work! His feet were tired with walking and his brain weary with the movement of the street, therefore he moved on to the reference room where he found an atmosphere of study that was very grateful.

Accustomed to work of this kind, he asked the attendant to bring him catalogues, and was soon surrounded with books and magazines which dealt with the modern study of psychic phenomena. He fell upon one or two of these which gave exhaustive generalizations, and he was astounded to find that European men of science of the loftiest type were engaged in the study of precisely the same phenomena which his mother claimed to produce.

Careless of all else, he remained until six o'clock absorbed and confused by what he read. Words and phrases like "telekinesis," "teleplastic," "parasitic personalities," "externalized motricity," "bio-psychic energy" danced about in his brain like fantastic insects. He fairly staggered with the weight of the conceptions laid upon him, and when at last he went out into the streets he had forgotten his race for place behind the counter.

It was nearly sunset, and his afternoon – his day – had gone for naught! He was as far as ever from securing work – and wages – to keep his little mother and himself from the corrupting care of charity. He was a bit disgusted with himself, too, for wasting valuable time, and yet he was enough of the scholar to feel a glow of delight in the company he had been keeping. There was something large and free in the attitude of those Italian men toward the universe, and before he had walked far he promised himself to go again and continue that line of investigation. As he walked up the avenue he came face to face with the dark, thin-faced girl who had knocked at his mother's door the day before. She seemed about to speak, but he passed her with blank look.

He found his mother at the window waiting for him, and upon seeing him she hurried to meet him at the head of the stairs.

"What luck?" she called, with a smile.

He shook his head. "Nothing doing," and received her caress rather coldly, for he perceived Mrs. Joyce in the room. "It isn't so easy to find a job. I'll be lucky if I dig one up in a week, I suppose."

Mrs. Joyce greeted him cordially. "I've just been making a proposition to your mother, Victor – I hope you'll let me call you Victor – which is, that we all go abroad for a few months till this storm blows over."

He looked at her with gravely interrogating glance. "How could we do that?"

She explained. "You both go as my guests, of course. We can motor through France in June and get up into Switzerland in July."

He sank into a chair and dazedly studied her. "Why should you offer to do all that for us?"

"Because I am very grateful to your mother for what she has done for me. She not only cured my mother of cancer – she has cured me of despair. She has taught me to believe again in the mystery of the world."

"You mean she has done this as – as a medium?"

"Yes – through her guides she has given me faith in the hereafter. Their advice on a hundred different things has made life easy for me. My wealth is largely due to the wisdom of Mr. Astor, who speaks through her. He advises, and so does your grandfather, that I take you all abroad this summer, and I think it a very nice suggestion."

"Oh, the suggestion came from The Voices, did it?" His voice was full of scornful suggestion.

"Yes; but I thought of it myself yesterday as I read that terrible article. You see, I'm told by Mr. Bartol, my lawyer, that the city officials are about to start another campaign against all forms of mediumship. I think it best, and so does your father, that we all leave the city for a time, and escape this persecution."

The beleaguered youth was not a polite deceiver at his best, and this proposal appeared to him not merely chimerical, but immoral, for the reason that his mother must have really proposed it. Through her uncanny power of hypnosis, of suggestion, she had put the idea into her rich friend's head. "I won't consider any such proposition," he bluntly answered. "I don't recognize my mother's claim. You owe her nothing. I don't believe she can cure cancer, and she has no right to advise anybody in business matters."

"You say that because you know nothing of the facts," Mrs. Joyce briskly replied. "I understand your situation perfectly. Your mother has kept me informed of her worries – she has no secrets from me – and I must say I foresaw this antagonism on your part. I felt that you were growing away from her, and yet The Voices advised her to keep you at school and to say nothing. To show you how close they watch you I can tell you that we've been informed of your whereabouts several times to-day. You met a young man at noon, a pale, serious young man, whose name is Gilmer, who said he would help you. Isn't that true?"

He was properly surprised. "Yes, I did meet such a man."

"Then you went to the library and read for a long time?"

He sneered. "Did The Voices tell you that I was turned down everywhere on account of my mother's reputation as a medium?"

"No; but they said you would oppose the idea of our going abroad, and that you were under discipline."

"You're tired, Victor," interposed the mother. "Don't worry over me any more now. I'll get you some coffee."

While she was gone on this errand Mrs. Joyce leaned toward Victor and said: "I can understand a part of your feeling, because there was a time when I lived in the world of definite, commonplace things – but you must not oppose your mother's Voices. They are as real to her as anything in this universe. I've *proved* their reality again and again. As I say, they have advised me in my investments and always right. In a sense – in a very real sense – I owe a part of my wealth to your mother, and the little that she has permitted me to do in return for her aid is trifling. I want to do more. Please be just to your dear little mother, who is truly a marvelous creature and loves you beyond all other earthly things. She lives only for you. If it were not for you she would pass on to the spirit plane to-night."

Victor listened to her in a sullen meditation. The whole situation was becoming incredibly fantastic, vaporous as the texture of a dream.

Mrs. Joyce went on: "Come to my house to-night for dinner. Never mind the morrow till the morrow comes. Come and talk with some friends of mine – they may help you."

He spoke thickly: "I'm much obliged, Mrs. Joyce. I'm grateful for what you've done for us, but to take her money or yours now would be – would be dishonest. I can't let you feed us any longer – we've got to fight this out alone."

"What will you do with her Voices?" she asked.

"Forget 'em," he answered, curtly.

"They'll force you to remember them," she warningly retorted. "I assure you they hold your fate in their hands."

Mrs. Ollnee, returning, cut short the discussion, which was growing heated.

As he drank his coffee Victor recovered a part of his native courtesy. "I'm going to win out," he said, with kindling eyes. "It would have been a wonder if I had found a job the first day. I'm going to keep going till I wear out my shoes."

A knock at the door made his mother start.

"Another reporter!" she whispered. "They're pestering me still."

Victor rose with a spring. "I'll attend to this reporter business," he said, hotly.

"No," interposed Mrs. Joyce; "let me go, please!"

He submitted, and she went to meet the intruder. Her quiet, authoritative voice could be heard saying: "Mrs. Ollnee is not able to see any one. That cruel and false article of yesterday has completely upset her. – No, I am only her friend and nurse. I have nothing to say except that the article in the *Star* was false and malignant."

Thereupon she closed and locked the door and came back quite serious. "They've been coming almost every hour, determined to see your mother. I would have taken her away, only she persisted in saying she must remain here till you returned."

"Have you been here all day?" he asked, moved by the thought of her loyalty.

His mother answered. "Louise came about ten this morning – and except for an hour at lunch we've both been here waiting, listening."

This devotion on the part of a rich and busy woman was deeply revealing. The youth was being educated swiftly into new conceptions of human nature. His mother was neither beautiful nor wise nor witty. Why should she attract and hold a lady like Mrs. Joyce? He wondered if she had been quite honest with him. Would her interest be the same if The Voices had not enriched her?

She returned to her invitations. "Now put on your dinner-suit and come with us," she insisted. "My niece, Leo, will be there – surely you will respond to that lure?"

His mother laid her small hand upon his arm. "Let us go, Victor. I am in terror here."

"Why did you stay? Why didn't you go before?" he demanded.

"Because The Voices said '*Wait!*' – and besides, I wanted to be here when you came."

He rose. "You go. I will come after dinner and bring you home."

Mrs. Joyce was quick on the trail of his intent. "You refuse to eat my bread! You *are* rigorous. Very well. Let it be so. Come, Lucy, let us go."

Mrs. Ollnee seemed to listen a moment, then rose. "You'll surely come after dinner, Victor?"

"Yes, I'll come about nine," he replied, in a tone that was hard and cold. And she went away deeply hurt.

Left alone, he walked about the "ghost-room" with bitterness deepening into fury. What were these invisible, intangible barriers which confined him? He stood beside the old brown table which he had hated and feared in his boyhood. What silliness it represented. The pile of slates, some of them still bearing messages in pencil or colored crayon, offered themselves to his hand. He took up one of these and read its oracular statement: "*He will come to see the glory of the faith. His neck will bow. It is discipline. Do not worry. FATHER.*" Here was the source of his troubles!

He dashed the slate to the floor and ground it under his heel. Catching the table by the side and up-ending it, he wrenched its legs off as he would have wrung the neck of a vulture. He breathed upon it a blast of contempt and hate, and, gathering it up in fragments, was starting to throw it into the alley when the door burst open and his mother reappeared, white, breathless, appalled.

"*Victor*; what are you doing?" she called, with piercing intonation.

He was shaken by her tone, her manner, but he answered, "I'm going to throw this accursed thing into the alley."

She put herself before him with one hand pressed upon her bosom, her breath weak and fluttering.

"You – shall – not! You are killing me. Don't you see that is a part of me. Don't you know – Put it down instantly! *My very life and soul are in it.*"

He dropped the broken thing in a disordered pile at her feet. Her anguish, which seemed both physical and mental, stunned him. As they stood thus confronting each other Mrs. Joyce returned. She seemed to comprehend the situation instantly, and, putting her arm about the little psychic's waist, gently said, "You'd better lie down, Lucy, you are hurt."

Mrs. Ollnee permitted herself to be led to the little couch silently sobbing.

It was growing dusky in the room, and the youth, though still rebellious, was profoundly affected by this action. His hot anger died away and a swift repentance softened him. "Don't cry, mother," he said, clumsily kneeling beside her. "I didn't think you cared so much about the old thing."

Mrs. Joyce broke forth in scorn: "What a crude young barbarian you are! That table is something more than a piece of wood to her. It is a sacred altar. It is the place where the quick and the dead meet. It is sentient with the touch of spirit hands – and you have desecrated it. You have laid violent hands upon your mother's innermost heart. You will destroy her if you keep on in this way."

At these words the youth for the first time caught a glimpse of the vital faith which lay behind and beneath these foolish and ridiculous practices. No matter what that worn table was to him, it stood for his mother's faith – that he now saw – and he was sorry.

"I can rebuild it again," he said. "It is not hopelessly smashed. I will repair it to-morrow."

The symbolism which could be read in his words seemed to comfort his mother and she grew quieter, but her face remained ghastly pale and her breathing troubled.

Mrs. Joyce turned to him again. "You can't deceive her. She knew the instant you laid your destroying hands on that slate."

He did not doubt this. In some hidden way his action had reached and acted upon his mother as she was speeding down the avenue. Her sudden return proved this – and his hair rose at the thought of her clairvoyancy, and in answer to Mrs. Joyce's question, "Why did you do it?" he replied, sullenly, but not bitterly:

"I did it because I detest the thing and all that goes with it. I have hated that table all my life."

"What did you think your mother would do?"

"I didn't stop to think. I only wanted to get the brute out of sight. I wanted to end the whole trade at once."

"You've got to be careful or you'll end your mother's earth-life. Let me tell you, boy, if you want to keep her on this plane with you you must be gentle with her. Any shock, especially when she is in trance, is very dangerous to her."

Victor began to feel his helplessness in the midst of the intangible entangling threads of his mother's faith. He now saw the folly of his action, and took an unexpected way of showing his contrition.

"If you'll forgive me, mother, I'll go with you to Mrs. Joyce's dinner. Come, let's get away from here for a little while; I feel stifled."

This pleased and comforted her amazingly. She rose and placed one frail, cold hand about his neck. "Dear boy! I forgive you. You didn't realize what you were doing."

Releasing himself he gathered up the fragments of the table and tenderly examined them. "It can be mended," he reported. "I'll do it the first thing in the morning."

A faint smile came back to his mother's face. "I don't mind, Victor. I feel already that this has brought us closer together. Your father is here – he is smiling – and I am happier than I've been for weeks."

Victor dressed for his party with trembling limbs. It seemed as if he had passed through a tremendous battle wherein he had been defeated – and yet his heart was strangely light.

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