

The Dead Smile

By F. Marion Crawford

I

Sir Hugh Ockram smiled as he sat by the open window of his study, in the late August afternoon. A curiously yellow cloud obscured the low sun, and the clear summer light turned lurid, as if it had been suddenly poisoned and polluted by the foul vapours of a plague. Sir Hugh's face seemed, at best, to be made of fine parchment drawn skin-tight over a wooden mask, in which two sunken eyes peered from far within.

The eyes peered from under wrinkled lids, alive and watchful like toads in their holes, side by side and exactly alike. But as the light changed, a little yellow glare flashed in each. He smiled, stretching pale lips across discoloured teeth in an expression of profound self-satisfaction, blended with the most unforgiving hatred and contempt for the human doll.

Nurse Macdonald, who was a hundred years old, said that when Sir Hugh smiled he saw the faces of two women in hell—two dead women he had betrayed. The smile widened.

The hideous disease of which Sir Hugh was dying had touched his brain. His son stood beside him, tall, white and delicate as an angel in a primitive picture. And though there was deep distress in his violet eyes as he looked at his father's face, he felt the shadow of that sickening smile stealing across his own lips, parting and drawing them against his will. It was like a bad dream, for he tried not to smile and smiled the more.

Beside him—strangely like him in her wan, angelic beauty, with the same shadowy golden hair, the same sad violet eyes, the same luminously pale face—Evelyn Warburton rested one hand upon his arm. As she looked into her uncle's eyes, she could not turn her own away and she too knew that the deathly smile was hovering on her own red lips, drawing them tightly across her little teeth, while two bright tears ran down her cheeks to her mouth, and dropped from the upper to the lower lip. The smile was like the shadow of death and the seal of damnation upon her pure, young face.

"Of course," said Sir Hugh very slowly, still looking out at the trees, "if you have made your mind up to be married, I cannot hinder you, and I don't suppose you attach the smallest importance to my consent—"

"Father!" exclaimed Gabriel reproachfully.

"No. I do not deceive myself," continued the old man, smiling terribly. "You will marry when I am dead, though there is a very good reason why you had better not—why you had better not," he repeated very emphatically, and he slowly turned his toad eyes upon the lovers.

"What reason?" asked Evelyn in a frightened voice.

"Never mind the reason, my dear. You will marry just as if it did not exist." There was a long pause. "Two gone," he said, his voice lowering strangely, "and two more will be four all together forever and ever, burning, burning, burning bright."

At the last words his head sank slowly back, and the little glare of his toad eyes disappeared under the swollen lids. Sir Hugh had fallen asleep, as he often did in his illness, even while speaking.

Gabriel Ockram drew Evelyn away, and from the study they went out into the dim hall. Softly closing the door behind them, each audibly drew a breath, as though some sudden danger had been passed. As they laid their hands each in the other's, their strangely-like eyes met in a long

look in which love and perfect understanding were darkened by the secret terror of an unknown thing. Their pale faces reflected each other's fear.

"It is his secret," said Evelyn at last. "He will never tell us what it is."

"If he dies with it," answered Gabriel, "let it be on his own head!"

"On his head!" echoed the dim hall. It was a strange echo. Some were frightened by it, for they said that if it were a real echo it should repeat everything and not give back a phrase here and there—now speaking, now silent. Nurse Macdonald said that the great hall would never echo a prayer when an Ockram was to die, though it would give back curses ten for one.

"On his head!" it repeated quite softly, and Evelyn started and looked round.

"It is only the echo," said Gabriel, leading her away.

They went out into the late afternoon light, and sat upon a stone seat behind the chapel, which had been built across the end of the east wing. It was very still. Not a breath stirred, and there was no sound near them. Only far off in the park a song-bird was whistling the high prelude to the evening chorus.

"It is very lonely here," said Evelyn, taking Gabriel's hand nervously and speaking as if she dreaded to disturb the silence. "If it were dark, I should be afraid."

"Of what? Of me?" Gabriel's sad eyes turned to her.

"Oh no! Never of you! But of the old Ockrams. They say they are just under our feet here in the north vault outside the chapel, all in their shrouds, with no coffins, as they used to bury them."

"As they always will. As they will bury my father, and me. They say an Ockram will not lie in a coffin."

"But it cannot be true. These are fairy tales, ghost stories!" Evelyn nestled nearer to her companion, grasping his hand more tightly as the sun began to go down.

"Of course. But there is the story of old Sir Vernon, who was beheaded for treason under James II. The family brought his body back from the scaffold in an iron coffin with heavy locks and put it in the north vault. But ever afterwards, whenever the vault was opened to bury another of the family, they found the coffin wide open, the body standing upright against the wall, and the head rolled away in a corner smiling at it."

"As Uncle Hugh smiles?" Evelyn shivered.

"Yes, I suppose so," answered Gabriel, thoughtfully. "Of course I never saw it, and the vault has not been opened for thirty years. None of us have died since then."

"And if...if Uncle Hugh dies, shall you...?" Evelyn stopped. Her beautiful thin face was quite white.

"Yes. I shall see him laid there too, with his secret, whatever it is." Gabriel sighed and pressed the girl's little hand.

"I do not like to think of it," she said unsteadily. "O Gabriel, what can the secret be? He said we had better not marry. Not that he forbade it, but he said it so strangely, and he smiled. Ugh!" Her small white teeth chattered with fear, and she looked over her shoulder while drawing still closer to Gabriel. "And, somehow, I felt it in my own face."

"So did I," answered Gabriel in a low, nervous voice. "Nurse Macdonald..." He stopped abruptly.

"What? What did she...?"

"Oh, nothing. She has told me things.... They would frighten you, dear. Come, it is growing chilly." He rose, but Evelyn held his hand in both of hers, still sitting and looking up into his face.

“But we shall be married just the same— Gabriel! Say that we shall!”

“Of course, darling, of course. But while my father is so very ill, it is impossible—”

“O Gabriel, Gabriel, dear! I wish we were married now!” Evelyn cried in sudden distress. “I know that something will prevent it and keep us apart.”

“Nothing shall!”

“Not Nothing human,” said Gabriel Ockram, as she drew him down to her.

And their faces, that were so strangely alike, met and touched. Gabriel knew that the kiss had a marvelous savor of evil. Evelyn’s lips were like the cool breath of a sweet and mortal fear that neither of them understood, for they were innocent and young. Yet she drew him to her by her lightest touch, as a sensitive plant shivers, waves its thin leaves, and bends and closes softly upon what it wants. He let himself be drawn to her willingly—as he would even if her touch had been deadly and poisonous—for he strangely loved that half voluptuous breath of fear, and he passionately desired the nameless evil something that lurked in her maiden lips.

“It is as if we loved in a strange dream,” she said.

“I fear the waking,” he murmured.

“We shall not wake, dear. When the dream is over it will have already turned into death, so softly that we shall not know it. But until then...”

She paused, her eyes seeking his, as their faces slowly came nearer. It was as if each had thoughts in their lips that foresaw and foreknew the other.

“Until then,” she said again, very low, her mouth near to his.

“Dream—till then,” he murmured.

II

Nurse Macdonald slept sitting all bent together in a great old leather arm chair with wings — many warm blankets wrapped about her, even in summer. She would rest her feet in a bag footstool lined with sheepskin while beside her, on a wooden table, there was a little lamp that burned at night, and an old silver cup, in which there was always something to drink.

Her face was very wrinkled, but the wrinkles were so small and fine and close together that they made shadows instead of lines. Two thin locks of hair, that were turning from white to a smoky yellow, fell over her temples from under her starched white cap. Every now and then she would wake from her slumber, her eyelids drawn up in tiny folds like little pink silk curtains, and her queer blue eyes would look straight ahead through doors and walls and worlds to a far place beyond. Then she’d sleep again with her hands one upon the other on the edge of the blanket, her thumbs grown longer than the fingers with age.

It was nearly one o’clock in the night, and the summer breeze was blowing the ivy branch against the panes of the window with a hushing caress. In the small room beyond, with the door ajar, the young maid who took care of Nurse Macdonald was fast asleep. All was very quiet. The old woman breathed regularly, and her drawn lips trembled each time the breath went out.

But outside the closed window there was a face. Violet eyes were looking steadily at the ancient sleeper.

Strange, as there were eighty feet from the sill of the window to the foot of the tower. It was like the face of Evelyn Warburton, yet the cheeks were thinner than Evelyn’s and as white as a gleam. The eyes stared and the lips were red with life. They were dead lips painted with new blood.

Slowly Nurse Macdonald's wrinkled eyelids folded back, and she looked straight at the face at the window thing?"

"Is it time?" she asked in her little old, faraway voice.

While she looked the face at the window changed, the eyes opened wider and wider till the white glared all round the bright violet and the bloody lips opened over gleaming teeth. The shadowy golden hair surrounding the face rose and streamed against the window in the night breeze and in answer to Nurse Macdonald's question came a sound that froze the living flesh.

It was a low-moaning voice, one that rose suddenly, like the scream of storm. Then it went from a moan to a wail, from a wail to a howl, and from a howl to the shriek of the tortured dead. He who has heard it before knows, and he can bear witness that the cry of the banshee is an evil cry to hear alone in the deep night.

When it was over and the face was gone, Nurse Macdonald shook a little in her great chair. She looked at the black square of the window, but there was nothing more there, nothing but the night and the whispering ivy branch. She turned her head to the door that was ajar, and there stood the young maid in her white gown, her teeth chattering with fright.

"It is time, child," said Nurse Macdonald. "I must go to him, for it is the end."

She rose slowly, leaning her withered hands upon the arms of the chair as the girl brought her a woolen gown, a great mantle and her crutch-stick. But very often the girl looked at the window and was unjointed with fear, and often Nurse Macdonald shook her head and said words which the maid could not understand.

"It was like the face of Miss Evelyn," said the girl, trembling.

But the ancient woman looked up sharply and angrily. Her queer blue eyes glared. She held herself up by the arm of the great chair with her left hand, and lifted up her crutch-stick to strike the maid with all her might.

But she did not.

"You are a good girl," she said, "but you are a fool. Pray for wit, child. Pray for wit—or else find service in a house other than Ockram Hall. Now bring the lamp and help me up."

Each step Nurse Macdonald took was a labour in itself, and as she moved, the maid's slippers clattered alongside. By the clacking noise the other servants knew that she was coming, very long before they saw her.

No one was sleeping now, and there were lights, and whisperings, and pale faces in the corridors near Sir Hugh's bedroom. Often someone would go in, and someone would come out, but every one made way for Nurse Macdonald, who had nursed Sir Hugh's father more than eighty years ago.

The light was soft and clear in the room. Gabriel Ockram stood by his father's bedside, and there knelt Evelyn Warburton—her hair lying like a golden shadow down her shoulder, and her hands clasped nervously together. Opposite Gabriel, a nurse was trying to make Sir Hugh drink, but he would not. His lips parted, but his teeth were set. He was very, very thin now, and as his eyes caught the light sideways, they were as yellow coals.

"Do not torment him," said Nurse Macdonald to the woman who held the cup. "Let me speak to him, for his hour is come."

"Let her speak to him," said Gabriel in a dull voice.

The ancient nurse leaned to the pillow and laid the feather-weight of her withered hand—that was like a grown moth—upon Sir Hugh's yellow fingers. Then she spoke to him earnestly, while only Gabriel and Evelyn were left in the room to hear.

“Hugh Ockram,” she said, “this is the end of your life; and as I saw you born, and saw your father born before you, I come to see you die. Hugh Ockram, will you tell me the truth?”

The dying man recognized the little faraway voice he had known all his life and he very slowly turned his yellow face to Nurse Macdonald, but he said nothing. Then she spoke again.

“Hugh Ockram, you will never see the daylight again. Will you tell the truth?”

His toad like eyes were not yet dull. They fastened themselves on her face.

“What do you want of me?” he asked, each word sounding more hollow than the last. “I have no secrets. I have lived a good life.”

Nurse Macdonald laughed—a tiny, cracked laugh that made her old head bob and tremble a little, as if her neck were on a steel spring. But Sir Hugh’s eyes grew red, and his pale lips began to twist.

“Let me die in peace,” he said slowly.

But Nurse Macdonald shook her head, and her brown, mothlike hand left his and fluttered to his forehead.

“By the mother that bore you and died of grief for the sins you did, tell me the truth!”

Sir Hugh’s lips tightened on his discoloured teeth.

“Not on earth,” he answered slowly.

“By the wife who bore your son and died heartbroken, tell me the truth!”

“Neither to you in life, nor to her in eternal death.”

His lips writhed, as if the words were coals between them, and a great drop of sweat rolled across the parchment of his forehead. Gabriel Ockram bit his hand as he watched his father die. But Nurse Macdonald spoke a third time.

“By the woman whom you betrayed, and who waits for you this night, Hugh Ockram, tell me the truth!”

“It is too late. Let me die in peace.”

His writhing lips began to smile across his yellow teeth, and his toadlike eyes glowed like evil jewels in his head.

“There is time,” said the ancient woman. “Tell me the name of Evelyn Warburton’s father. Then I will let you die in peace.”

Evelyn started. She stared at Nurse Macdonald, and then at her uncle.

“The name of Evelyn’s father?” he repeated slowly, while the awful smile spread upon his dying face.

The light was growing strangely dim in the great room. As Evelyn looked on, Nurse Macdonald’s crooked shadow on the wall grew gigantic. Sir Hugh’s breath was becoming thick, rattling in his throat, as death crept in like a snake and choked it back. Evelyn prayed aloud, high and clear.

Then something rapped at the window, and she felt her hair rise upon her head. She looked around in spite of herself. And when she saw her own white face looking in at the window, her own eyes staring at her through the glass—wide and fearful—her own hair streaming against the pane, and her own lips dashed with blood, she rose slowly from the floor and stood rigid for one moment before she screamed once and fell straight back into Gabriel’s arms. But the shriek that answered hers was the fear-shriek of a tormented corpse out of which the soul cannot pass for shame of deadly sins.

Sir Hugh Ockram sat upright in his deathbed, and saw and cried aloud:

“Evelyn!” His harsh voice broke and rattled in his chest as he sank down. But still Nurse Macdonald tortured him, for there was a little life left in him still.

“You have seen the mother as she waits for you, Hugh Ockram. Who was this girl Evelyn’s father? What was his name?”

For the last time the dreadful smile came upon the twisted lips, very slowly, very surely now. The toad eyes glared red and the parchment face glowed a little in the flickering light; for the last time words came.

“They know it in hell.”

Then the glowing eyes went out quickly. The yellow face turned waxen pale, and a great shiver ran through the thin body as Hugh Ockram died.

But in death he still smiled, for he knew his secret and kept it still. He would take it with him to the other side, to lie with him forever in the north vault of the chapel where the Ockrams lie uncoffined in their shrouds—all but one. Though he was dead, he smiled, for he had kept his treasure of evil truth to the end.

There was none left to tell the name he had spoken, but there was all the evil he had not undone left to bear fruit.

As they watched—Nurse Macdonald and Gabriel, who held the still unconscious Evelyn in his arms while he looked at the father—they felt the dead smile crawling along their own lips. Then they shivered a little as they both looked at Evelyn as she lay with her head on Gabriel’s shoulder, for though she was very beautiful, the same sickening smile was twisting her young mouth too, and it was like the foreshadowing of a great evil that they could not understand.

By and by they carried Evelyn out, and when she opened her eyes the smile was gone. From far away in the great house the sound of weeping and crooning came up the stairs and echoed along the dismal corridors as the women had begun to mourn the dead master in the Irish fashion. The hall had echoes of its own all that night, like the far-off wail of the banshee among forest trees.

When the time was come they took Sir Hugh in his winding-sheet on a trestle bier and bore him to the chapel, through the iron door and down the long descent to the north vault lit with tapers, to lay him by his father. The two men went in first to prepare the place, and came back staggering like drunken men, their faces white.

But Gabriel Ockram was not afraid, for he knew. When he went in, alone, he saw the body of Sir Vernon Ockram leaning upright against the stone wall. Its head lay on the ground nearby with the face turned up. The dried leather lips smiled horribly at the dried-up corpse, while the iron coffin, lined with black velvet, stood open on the floor.

Gabriel took the body in his hands—for it was very light, being quite dried by the air of the vault—and those who peeped in the door saw him lay it in the coffin again. They heard it rustle a little, as it touched the sides and the bottom, like a bundle of reeds. He also placed the head upon the shoulders and shut down the lid, which fell to with the snap of its rusty spring.

After that they laid Sir Hugh beside his father, on the trestle bier on which they had brought him, and they went back to the chapel. But when they looked into one another’s faces, master and men, they were all smiling with the dead smile of the corpse they had left in the vault. They could not bear to look at one another again until it had faded away.

III

Gabriel Ockram became Sir Gabriel, inheriting the baronetcy with the half-ruined fortune left by his father, and Evelyn Warburton continued to live at Ockram Hall, in the south room that had been hers ever since she could remember. She could not go away, for there were no relatives to

whom she could have gone, and besides, there seemed to be no reason why she should not stay. The world would never trouble itself to care what the Ockrams did on their Irish estates. It was long since the Ockrams had asked anything of the world.

So Sir Gabriel took his father's place at the dark old table in the dining room, and Evelyn sat opposite to him— until such time as their mourning should be over — and they might be married at last. Meanwhile, their lives went on as before — since Sir Hugh had been a hopeless invalid during the last year of his life, and they had seen him but once a day for a little while — spending most of their time together in a strangely perfect companionship.

Though the late summer saddened into autumn, and autumn darkened into winter, and storm followed storm, and rain poured on rain through the short days and the long nights, Ockram Hall seemed less gloomy since Sir Hugh had been laid in the north vault beside his father.

At Christmastide Evelyn decked the great hall with holly and green boughs. Huge fires blazed on every hearth. The tenants were all bid to come to a New Year's dinner at which they ate and drank well, while Sir Gabriel sat at the head of the table. Evelyn came in when the port wine was brought and the most respected of the tenants made a speech to her health.

When the speechmaker said it had been a long time since there had been a Lady Ockram, Sir Gabriel shaded his eyes with his hand and looked down at the table; a faint color came into Evelyn's transparent cheeks. And, said the gray-haired farmer, it was longer still since there had been a Lady Ockram so fair as the next was to be, and he drank to the health of Evelyn Warburton.

Then the tenants all stood up and shouted for her. Sir Gabriel stood up likewise, beside Evelyn. But when the men gave the last and loudest cheer of all, there was a voice not theirs, above them all, higher, fiercer, louder— an unearthly scream-shrieking for the bride of Ockram Hall. It was so loud that the holly and the green boughs over the great chimney shook and waved as if a cool breeze were blowing over them. The men turned very pale. Many of them set down their glasses, but others let them fall upon the floor. Looking into one another's faces, they saw that they were all smiling strangely—a dead smile—like dead Sir Hugh's.

The fear of death was suddenly upon them all, so that they fled in a panic, falling over one another like wild beasts in the burning forest when the thick smoke runs along before the flame. Tables were overturned, drinking glasses and bottles were broken in heaps, and dark red wine crawled like blood upon the polished floor.

Sir Gabriel and Evelyn were left standing alone at the head of the table before the wreck of their feast, not daring to turn to look at one another, for each knew that the other smiled. But Gabriel's right arm held her and his left hand clasped her tight as they stared before them. But for the shadows of her hair, one might not have told their two faces apart.

They listened long, but the cry came not again, and eventually the dead smile faded from their lips as each remembered that Sir Hugh Ockram lay in the north vault smiling in his winding sheet, in the dark, because he had died with his secret.

So ended the tenants' New Year's dinner. But from that time on, Sir Gabriel grew more and more silent and his face grew even paler and thinner than before. Often, without warning and without words, he would rise from his seat as if something moved him against his will. He would go out into the rain or the sunshine to the north side of the chapel, sit on the stone bench and stare at the ground as if he could see through it, through the vault below, and through the white winding sheet in the dark, to the dead smile that would not die.

Always when he went out in that way Evelyn would come out presently and sit beside him. Once, as in the past, their beautiful faces came suddenly near; their lids drooped, and their red

lips were almost joined together. But as their eyes met, they grew wide and wild, so that the white showed in a ring all round the deep violet. Their teeth chattered and their hands were like the hands of corpses, for fear of what was under their feet, and of what they knew but could not see.

Once, Evelyn found Sir Gabriel in the chapel alone, standing before the iron door that led down to the place of death with the key to the door in his hand, but he had not put it into the lock. Evelyn drew him away, shivering, for she had also been driven—in waking dreams—to see that terrible thing again, and to find out whether it had changed since it had been laid there.

“I’m going mad,” said Sir Gabriel, covering his eyes with his hand as he went with her. “I see it in my sleep. I see it when I am awake. It draws me to it, day and night and unless I see it I shall die!”

“I know,” answered Evelyn, “I know. It is as if threads were spun from it like a spider’s, drawing us down to it.” She was silent for a moment and then she started violently and grasped his arm with a man’s strength, and almost screamed the words she spoke. “But we must not go there!” she cried. “We must not go!”

Sir Gabriel’s eyes were half shut, and he was not moved by the agony of her face.

“I shall die, unless I see it again,” he said, in a quiet voice not like his own. And all that day and that evening he scarcely spoke, thinking of it, always thinking, while Evelyn Warburton quivered from head to foot with a terror she had never known.

One grey winter morning, she went alone to Nurse Macdonald’s room in the tower, and sat down beside the great leather easy chair, laying her thin white hand upon the withered fingers.

“Nurse,” she said, “what was it that Uncle Hugh should have told you, that night before he died? It must have been an awful secret—and yet, though you asked him, I feel somehow that you know it, and that you know why he used to smile so dreadfully.”

The old woman’s head moved slowly from side to side.

“I only guess.... I shall never know,” she answered slowly in her cracked little voice.

“But what do you guess? Who am I? Why did you ask who my father was? You know I am Colonel Warburton’s daughter, and my mother was Lady Ockram’s sister, so that Gabriel and I are cousins. My father was killed in Afghanistan. What secret can there be?”

“I do not know. I can only guess.”

“Guess what?” asked Evelyn imploringly, pressing the soft withered hands, as she leaned forward. But Nurse Macdonald’s wrinkled lids dropped suddenly over her queer blue eyes, and her lips shook a little with her breath, as if she were asleep.

Evelyn waited. By the fire the Irish maid was knitting fast. Her needles clicked like three or four clocks ticking against each other. But the real clock on the wall solemnly ticked alone, checking off the seconds of the woman who was a hundred years old, and had not many days left. Outside the ivy branch beat the window in the wintry blast, as it had beaten against the glass a hundred years ago.

Then as Evelyn sat there she felt again the waking of a horrible desire—the sickening wish to go down, down to the thing in the north vault, and to open the winding-sheet, and see whether it had changed; and she held Nurse Macdonald’s hands as if to keep herself in her place and fight against the appalling attraction of the evil dead.

But the old cat that kept Nurse Macdonald’s feet warm, lying always on the footstool, got up and stretched itself, and looked up into Evelyn’s eyes, while its back arched, and its tail thickened and bristled, and its ugly pink lips drew back in a devilish grin, showing its sharp teeth. Evelyn stared at it, half fascinated by its ugliness. Then the creature suddenly put out one

paw with all its claws spread, and spat at the girl. All at once the grinning cat was like the smiling corpse far down below. Evelyn shivered down to her small feet, and covered her face with her free hand, lest Nurse Macdonald should wake and see the dead smile there, for she could feel it.

The old woman had already opened her eyes again, and she touched her cat with the end of her crutch-stick, whereupon its back went down and its tail shrunk, and it sidled back to its place on the footstool. But its yellow eyes looked up sideways at Evelyn, between the slits of its lids.

“What is it that you guess, nurse?” asked the young girl again.

“A bad thing, a wicked thing. But I dare not tell you, lest it might not be true, and the very thought should blast your life. For if I guess right, he meant that you should not know, and that you two should marry and pay for his old sin with your souls.”

“He used to tell us that we ought not to marry.”

“Yes—he told you that, perhaps. But it was as if a man put poisoned meat before a starving beast, and said ‘do not eat,’ but never raised his hand to take the meat away. And if he told you that you should not marry, it was because he hoped you would; for of all men living or dead, Hugh Ockram was the falsest man that ever told a cowardly lie, and the crudest that ever hurt a weak woman, and the worst that ever loved a sin.”

“But Gabriel and I love each other,” said Evelyn very sadly.

Nurse Macdonald’s old eyes looked far away, at sights seen long ago, and that rose in the grey winter air amid the mists of an ancient youth.

“If you love, you can die together,” she said, very slowly. “Why should you live, if it is true? I am a hundred years old. What has life given me? The beginning is fire; the end is a heap of ashes; and between the end and the beginning lies all the pain of the world. Let me sleep, since I cannot die.”

Then the old woman’s eyes closed again, and her head sank a little lower upon her breast.

So Evelyn went away and left her asleep, with the cat asleep on the footstool. The young girl tried to forget Nurse Macdonald’s words, but she could not, for she heard them over and over again in the wind, and behind her on the stairs. And as she grew sick with fear of the frightful unknown evil to which her soul was bound, she felt a bodily something pressing her, pushing her, forcing her on from the other side. She felt threads that drew her mysteriously, and when she shut her eyes, she saw in the chapel behind the altar, the low iron door through which she must pass to go to the thing.

As she lay awake at night, she drew the sheet over her face, lest she should see shadows on the wall beckoning to her. The sound of her own warm breath made whisperings in her ears, while she held the mattress with her hands, to keep from getting up and going to the chapel. It would have been easier if there had not been a way thither through the library, by a door which was never locked. It would be fearfully easy to take her candle and go softly through the sleeping house. The key of the vault lay under the altar behind a stone that turned. She knew that little secret. She could go alone and see.

But when she thought of it, she felt her hair rise on her head. She shivered so that the bed shook, then the horror went through her in a cold thrill that was agony again, like a myriad of icy needles boring into her nerves.

The old clock in Nurse Macdonald's tower struck midnight. From her room she could hear the creaking chains, and weights in their box in the corner of the staircase, and the jarring of the rusty lever that lifted the hammer. She had heard it all her life. It struck eleven strokes clearly, and then came the twelfth with a dull half stroke, as though the hammer were too weary to go on and had fallen asleep against the bell.

The old cat got up from the footstool and stretched itself. Nurse Macdonald opened her ancient eyes and looked slowly round the room by the dim light of the night lamp. She touched the cat with her crutch-stick, and it lay down upon her feet. She drank a few drops from her cup and went to sleep again.

But downstairs Sir Gabriel sat straight up as the clock struck, for he had dreamed a fearful dream of horror, and his heart stood still. He awoke at its stopping and it beat again furiously with his breath, like a wild thing set free. No Ockram had ever known fear waking, but sometimes it came to Sir Gabriel in his sleep.

He pressed his hands to his temples as he sat up in bed. His hands were icy cold, but his head was hot. The dream faded far and in its place there came the master thought that racked his life. With the thought also came the sick twisting of his lips in the dark that would have been a smile. Far off, Evelyn Warburton dreamed that the dead smile was on her mouth, and awoke—starting with a little moan—her face in her hands, shivering.

But Sir Gabriel struck a light and got up and began to walk up and down his great room. It was midnight and he had barely slept an hour, and in the north of Ireland the winter nights are long. "I shall go mad," he said to himself, holding his forehead. He knew that it was true. For weeks and months the possession of the thing had grown upon him like a disease, till he could think of nothing without thinking first of that. And now all at once it outgrew his strength, and he knew that he must be its instrument or lose his mind. He knew that he must do the deed he hated and feared, if he could fear anything, or that something would snap in his brain and divide him from life while he was yet alive. He took the candlestick in his hand, the old-fashioned heavy candlestick that had always been used by the head of the house. He did not think of dressing, but went as he was—in his silk night clothes and his slippers—and opened the door.

Everything was very still in the great old house. He shut the door behind him and walked noiselessly on the carpet through the long corridor. A cool breeze blew over his shoulder and blew the flame of his candle straight out. Instinctively he stopped and looked round, but all was still, and the upright flame burned steadily. He walked on, and instantly a strong draught was behind him, almost extinguishing the light. It seemed to blow him on his way, ceasing whenever he turned, coming again when he went on—invisible, icy.

Down the great staircase to the echoing hall he went, seeing nothing but the flaring flame of the candle standing away from him over the guttering wax. The cold wind blew over his shoulder and through his hair.

On he passed through the open door into the library dark with old books and carved bookcases. On he went through the door with shelves and the imitated backs of books painted on it, which shut itself after him with a soft click.

He entered the low-arched passage, and though the door was shut behind him and fitted tightly in its frame, still the cold breeze blew the flame forward as he walked. He was not afraid; but his face was very pale and his eyes were wide and bright, seeing already in the dark air the picture of the thing beyond. But in the chapel he stood still, his hand on the little turning stone tablet in the back of the stone altar. On the tablet were engraved the words:

Clavis sepulchri Clarissimorum Dominorum De Ockram
("the key to the vault of the most illustrious lords of Ockram").

Sir Gabriel paused and listened. He fancied that he heard a sound far off in the great house where all had been so still, but it did not come again. Yet he waited at the last, and looked at the low iron door. Beyond it, down the long descent, lay his father uncoffined, six months dead, corrupt, terrible in his clinging shroud. The strangely preserving air of the vault could not yet have done its work completely. But on the thing's ghastly features, with their half-dried, open eyes, there would still be the frightful smile with which the man had died—the smile that haunted.

As the thought crossed Sir Gabriel's mind, he felt his lips writhing, and he struck his own mouth in wrath with the back of his hand so fiercely that a drop of blood ran down his chin, and another, and more, falling back in the gloom upon the chapel pavement. But still his bruised lips twisted themselves. He turned the tablet by the simple secret. It needed no safer fastening, for had each Ockram been coffined in pure gold, and had the door been open wide, there was not a man in Tyrone brave enough to go down to that place, save Gabriel Ockram himself, with his angel's face, his thin, white hands, and his sad unflinching eyes. He took the great old key and set it into the lock of the iron door. The heavy, rattling noise echoed down the descent beyond like footsteps, as if a watcher had stood behind the iron and were running away within, with heavy dead feet. And though he was standing still, the cool wind was from behind him, and blew the flame of the candle against the iron panel. He turned the key.

Sir Gabriel saw that his candle was short. There were new ones on the altar, with long candlesticks, so he lit one and left his own burning on the floor. As he set it down on the pavement his lip began to bleed again, and another drop fell upon the stones.

He drew the iron door open and pushed it back against the chapel wall, so that it should not shut of itself, while he was within; and the horrible draught of the sepulchre came up out of the depths in his face, foul and dark. He went in, but though the fetid air met him, yet the flame of the tall candle was blown straight from him against the wind while he walked down the easy incline with steady steps, his loose slippers slapping the pavement as he trod.

He shaded the candle with his hand, and his fingers seemed to be made of wax and blood as the light shone through them. And in spite of him the unearthly draught forced the flame forward, till it was blue over the black wick, and it seemed as if it must go out. But he went straight on, with shining eyes.

The downward passage was wide, and he could not always see the walls by the struggling light, but he knew when he was in the place of death by the larger, drearier echo of his steps in the greater space, and by the sensation of a distant blank wall. He stood still, almost enclosing the flame of the candle in the hollow of his hand. He could see a little, for his eyes were growing used to the gloom. Shadowy forms were outlined in the dimness, where the biers of the Ockrams stood crowded together, side by side, each with its straight, shrouded corpse, strangely preserved by the dry air, like the empty shell that the locust sheds in summer. And a few steps before him he saw clearly the dark shape of headless Sir Vernon's iron coffin, and he knew that nearest to it lay the thing he sought.

He was as brave as any of those dead men had been. They were his fathers, and he knew that sooner or later he should lie there himself, beside Sir Hugh, slowly drying to a parchment shell. But as yet, he was still alive.

He closed his eyes a moment as three great drops stood on his forehead.

Then he looked again, and by the whiteness of the winding sheet he knew his father's corpse, for all the others were brown with age; and, moreover, the flame of the candle was blown toward it. He made four steps till he reached it, and suddenly the light burned straight and high, shedding a dazzling yellow glare upon the fine linen that was all white, save over the face, and where the joined hands were laid on the breast. And at those places ugly stains had spread, darkened with outlines of the features and of the tight clasped fingers. There was a frightful stench of drying death.

As Sir Gabriel looked down, something stirred behind him, softly at first, then more noisily, and something fell to the stone floor with a dull thud and rolled up to his feet. He started back and saw a withered head lying almost face upward on the pavement, grinning at him. He felt the cold sweat standing on his face, and his heart beat painfully.

For the first time in all his life that evil thing which men call fear was getting hold of him, checking his heart-strings as a cruel driver checks a quivering horse, clawing at his backbone with icy hands, lifting his hair with freezing breath, climbing up and gathering in his midriff with leaden weight.

Yet he bit his lip and bent down, holding the candle in one hand, to lift the shroud back from the head of the corpse with the other. Slowly he lifted it. It clove to the half-dried skin of the face, and his hand shook as if someone had struck him on the elbow, but half in fear and half in anger at himself, he pulled it, so that it came away with a little ripping sound. He caught his breath as he held it, not yet throwing it back, and not yet looking. The horror was working in him and he felt that old Vernon Ockram was standing up in his iron coffin, headless, yet watching him. While he held his breath he felt the dead smile twisting his lips. In sudden wrath at his own misery, he tossed the death-stained linen backward, and looked at last. He ground his teeth lest he should shriek aloud. There it was, the thing that haunted him, that haunted Evelyn Warburton, that was like a blight on all that came near him.

The dead face was blotched with dark stains, and the thin, grey hair was matted about the discoloured forehead. The sunken lids were half open, and the candlelight gleamed on something foul where the toad eyes had lived.

But yet the dead thing smiled, as it had smiled in life. The ghastly lips were parted and drawn wide and tight upon the wolfish teeth, cursing still, and still defying hell to do its worst—defying, cursing, and always and forever smiling alone in the dark.

Sir Gabriel opened the sheet where the hands were. The blackened, withered fingers were closed upon something stained and mottled. Shivering from head to foot, but fighting like a man in agony for his life, he tried to take the package from the dead man's hold. But as he pulled at it the clawlike fingers seemed to close more tightly. When he pulled harder the shrunken hands and arms rose from the corpse with a horrible look of life following his motion—then as he wrenched the sealed packet loose at last, the hands fell back into their place still folded.

He set down the candle on the edge of the bier to break the seals from the stout paper. Kneeling on one knee, to get a better light, he read what was within, written long ago in Sir Hugh's queer hand. He was no longer afraid.

He read how Sir Hugh had written it all down that it might perchance be a witness of evil and of his hatred.

He had written how he had loved Evelyn Warburton, his wife's sister; and how his wife had died of a broken heart with his curse upon her. He wrote how Warburton and he had fought side by side in Afghanistan, and Warburton had fallen; but Ockram had brought his comrade's wife back a full year later, and little Evelyn, her child, had been born in Ockram Hall. And he wrote

how he had wearied of the mother, and she had died like her sister with his curse on her; and how Evelyn had been brought up as his niece, and how he had trusted that his son Gabriel and his daughter, innocent and unknowing, might love and marry, and the souls of the women he had betrayed might suffer yet another anguish before eternity was out. And, last of all, he hoped that some day, when nothing could be undone, the two might find his writing and live on, as man and wife, not daring to tell the truth for their children's sake and the world's word.

This he read, kneeling beside the corpse in the north vault, by the light of the altar candle. He had read it all and then he thanked God aloud that he had found the secret in time. When he finally rose to his feet and looked down at the dead face it had changed. The smile was gone from it. The jaw had fallen a little and the tired, dead lips were relaxed. And then there was a breath behind him and close to him, not cold like that which had blown the flame of the candle as he came, but warm and human. He turned suddenly.

There she stood, all in white, with her shadowy golden hair. She had risen from her bed and had followed him noiselessly. When she found him reading, she read over his shoulder.

He started violently when he saw her, for his nerves were unstrung. Then he cried out her name in that still place of death:

“Evelyn!”

“My brother!” she answered softly and tenderly, putting out both hands to meet his.