

## The Drug

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I never suspected that my quiet friend was a wizard. Until that fatal Sunday afternoon I had always supposed that the little black door was a cupboard. This was the way of it.

It had long been my habit to spend Sunday with my quiet friend. I believe in Sunday as the Day of Rest, and the British Sunday is usually the acme of restless misery. But in my friend's house and its quiet park the wheels of the week went round smoothly. Especially so in the little observatory which he had built over the lake. It had no door upon the landward side, but a quay ran within it and beneath, so that (entering by boat) one found oneself at the foot of a small spiral staircase, narrow and dark, which led one out into a bright room, windowed on every side, at a height of nearly fifty feet from the water. So large and lofty was the room, so narrow seemed the tower, that I may surely be excused for having thought that the little black door in the East was but a shallow cupboard.

Many a Sunday had passed pleasantly within this room. Now we would read, now play chess or cards; or now he would play upon the violin, when our morning's sport among the trout was over. It was our custom to broil the fish over a clear fire, and to eat it with bread and the fruit of his beautiful orchards, while certain goodly vintages refreshed us with their subtle enthusiasm.

I should like you to picture my friend. He was still young, pale and slim, with a certain remote beauty dwelling lively on his cheeks, deep in his eyes. He was



quiet as few men are quiet, yet every gesture glittered with starry joy.

His quiet, indeed, was the twinkling of the stars.

Upon this fatal Sunday afternoon, as we played chess together, I noticed thrice that his attention wandered to the clock with grave enquiry.

So preoccupied, indeed, was he that the game languished, and he agreed to a draw. "Will you forgive me," he said, "for a moment if I leave you? As you know, I dabble slightly in chemistry, and an important operation awaits a particular instant of time this afternoon. Stay!" he added, "why should you not become (as Kelly says) 'partaker of the mysteries of the creation'?"

Thus saying, he opened the door—the little black door—with a key (for it had no handle), and I beheld a curious apartment built in the thickness of the wall.

Very long, very narrow, very lofty; its walls of dead black. At one end hung in the midst a tall, slim tube of pale violet—a film of fire in whose light we seemed colourless spectres.

On the walls were shelves full of strange apparatus, mostly of glass or—as it seemed—silver.

My quiet friend executed some intricate movements with deft elegance.

Enough!" he smiled—" 'twas but a moment's work, yet many a month have I had to wait for the right instant."

I had no idea," said I, "that so strange a laboratory existed."

The products," he answered, "are in keeping. Look at this flask!"

'Twas a queer twisted shape, greenish with gold flecks—something not inhuman perhaps; something sinuous and serpentine, beyond doubt.

This liquor," he continued, as we moved back into the other room, "is made by taking pure mercury and exposing it in a certain manner to the action of the sun and of the air. The fire then passes over it and it is ready to receive the influence of the constellation of Virgo, and of Saturn the planet. Thus it grows exceedingly dark—yet at the end? Behold!"

He placed a drop upon the palm of his hand. 'Twas a drop of purest opal, flashing with many tints, self-luminous. A light smoke floated up from it into the still air: a moment, and it was vanished altogether.

'Tis a volatile drug!" explained my friend; "even now I am at work upon it, that I may fix it. But the task is passing hard."

What is its name?" I asked.

Surely you are not one of those who think that by naming aught they have explained it! Suffice it," he added, "that all men drink once of this drug, but no man twice!"

Then," I laughed, "the name of it must be Death."

No!" he smiled, "I think not. Come, drink, my friend! It is the drug that giveth strange vision."

He poured about a drachm of the fluid into a tall glass. Its appearance was quite altered, being now of a grey pearly sheen.

Drink!" he cried, "drink!"

I lifted the glass and drank. Its taste was subtle and sweet as a kiss is; an ecstasy woke in me for an instant. Then I sank down, out of things, into a rich red gloom that grew blacker and blacker. Meseems that much time passed; but who can measure the time of a consciousness that is but the negation of all things?

Yet was I content in annihilation and—as it seemed—at rest.

## II.

Quite suddenly consciousness returned. I was muffled in black night, suffocated by darkness, awake to a strange nameless fear.

Hardly was I aware of this when from all sides came upon me an agonising pressure, like the frenzied grip of some giant hand. Even as my bones crushed beneath it, it relaxed. But my peace was gone; I was disturbed, anxious; I waited.

Not in vain. Again and again came the clutch upon me, each time more terrible than the last.

'Twas all so meaningless—I never guessed—how could I guess?

Also I tried to struggle and to shriek. Useless; my voice seemed gone.

Then—ah God! one spasm of steel ten thousand times fiercer than all the rest—a blaze of light in my eyes—and a wail of helpless agony, as it were, crushed out of me, that turned into a shrill scream of pain—of pain—unspeakable—unthinkable—I cannot bear to write of it.

Then a long lull.

A certain animal content, reaction from the agony.

A certain animal discontent, echo of the agony.

And dawning vistas of strange visions.

Of strange, strange visions.

Vast was the concave of the orb of light wherein I found myself. The light was of a cool, earthy green filtered through dew and reflected by flowers. A soft al-

luring scent was in the air; and a ripple as of slow invisible waters.

A tide of happiness and expectation played in my soul like the wind in the branches of an oak, making delicious music. Yet still there came now and again swift, strange pangs memorial of that past agony, and sudden fits of weeping shook me. But, one dream with another, the scene was inexpressly delightful.

The sole avenue open to the forces of mental discomfort was the budding sense of insecurity. Pleasures and pains alike had no obvious source; their function and purpose were still more obscure. The question even arose: Are all the phenomena *detached*? Or, in a word, am I insane?

The stress of this particular anxiety was increased by the alluring paths of research that opened to me. As vision after vision passed in fleeting rapture over my gaze, I seemed to grasp a certain shadowy nexus; then would arise another in the light of which the whole grouping broke down.

It seems trifling; you would hardly believe the mental agony that this simple matter caused; and—now—rose ever the mocking query: Insane?

However, as I became more used to the scene, certain facts did become clearer. The faint greenish luminosity was certainly due to the concourse of bright stars that hung in the limpid, colourless ether. One of these stars would now and again come dropping through the sky, and each, as it dropped, would burst into flame, shaped into some strange vision which riveted my attention. It would perhaps pass near me, so that the wind of its presence would tinge my being with some portion of its influence. But none of these actually struck me until one—'twas a bigger star than most—burst into a glorious face more beautiful than sea-born Aphrodite. As it streamed through the sky, the flame of its pace

became an aureole of wondrous hair. Nearer, nearer it came; my soul leapt out to meet it. Innocence, god-head, peace, love, gentleness, all infinite rapture were hers. My soul leapt out to meet her. Now! Now! And waves of purest gold streamed through all my being as our lips met in one long passionate kiss.

But, as this endured, it changed. Her lips grew hot—horrible. Beneath her mouth my lips rotted away; unutterable pangs tore asunder my whole being. Suddenly, as a shock, all that soul-shaking vision passes; but it left me trembling. Now, too, all the rapture of joyous expectation began to cloud. The vivid stream of blood in me began to slacken. The faint dawn-blush of the universe tinged its green with rose, with gold—and dull grey patches in the gold. And then I became aware of certain faces behind me. Behind me—however swift I turned, I could only catch the vaguest glimpses of them. But the impression was that of forces too unutterably malignant, menacing. Yet the flood of the exaltation of the vision bore me away, and they were easily forgotten. Until in the full current the star swept upon me from the height, and I recognised the type of face that I had known as *Theirs*. It passed me, but so close that, fast as it fell, it chilled me horribly. It seemed, too, as if I had moved swiftly to avoid it. And therewith came a sinking fear. Before I had always been stable in a world of change. Now forsooth I too am mobile! the fear shook me horribly.

Then, too, a spasm of remembrance of the evil woman. It was as if her nature had passed into me, become part of me. And I loathed myself. Thus the dreadful war began: that war wherein a man is set against himself—the strife that has no end.

Yet at this very moment a strange, new phenomenon took away my breath—my whole life lost itself therein.

A star grew, brighter than a million stars, and headlong from the vault it fell, rayed with gossamer gold that streamed and filled the whole bright heaven. And as it came to me it loved me—I saw a face of sorrow and strange longing, of hunger for the unattainable mingled with ecstasy for what it had attained. This face drew near to me; and the hands pressed mine, and put them to its lips, and my lips trembled.

Then we kissed, and the vision dissolved into an ecstasy too serene and exquisite to have any object.

As did the other visitor, this too suddenly passed—yet still that star hangs in the vault (so I felt), and will hang ever.

This was a mighty consolation. For now the vision swiftly shifted, and took new forms and lives.

As if the subtle poison of the drug had taken on a new phase.

Not only were the objects of the vision altered, but my point of view began to change.

### III.

It was no longer expectation of some bliss ineffable that informed the dream. This was remembered, indeed, but with a sneer. Instead of it, dominant, compelling, an apprehension of some horror beyond naming. So terrible seemed the meaning of the vision—that meaning which I had sought so long—that I strove to shut out all reflection upon it, to busy myself with the phenomena themselves.

Yet as I came to myself out of this resolution, it was to see the vulture eyes of one of the Faces, that regarded me, a triumph unholy in its hate against me. I swooned.



Coming to myself again, I strove to regain the lost control. I clung to the tangible, the visible. Yet these gradually deteriorated as time passed. The heaven of gold was almost hidden by angry clouds, the sun, dull, rayless red of dying fire, became a hateful thing.

Anon more shakings of the fear unnameable; anon more visions of corruption, more urgent intimations of the close hostility of those fearful Faces.

Only by stern grip of myself could I shut out this terror—and, once it had entered in, I found strange liability to recurrence.

Yet upon the things visible and tangible, I still gained; their mastery became easy to me. Save only that the action of clasping them as I needed them seemed (it may be) to recall the clutch upon me at the beginning of the vision. With this result, that I became instantly conscious of the fatuity of my state, that the thing I grasped eluded me even *because* I had succeeded.

Yet so terrible was any inward reflection that I clung still fiercely and more fiercely to the visible gains. How they had changed! Beauty had almost vanished; harmony was clean gone; the one thing desirable yet was a certain rod of iron that hung above me. This I aspired to; this was alike my fear and my desire.

For I feared that it might come whirling through the air and destroy me—unless I could reach up to it—grasp it—make it mine.

So thereunto I strove.

And behold I found myself sitting in a great course of monkeys, whose jabber deafened every other sound. Six hundred and sixty-nine there were, and I among them, I one of them.

Yet even so I strove. I aped their cunning, their avarice, their folly; in the end I became head of them.

And now—yes, now at last! the iron rod was in my hand. I raised it to smite—when, lo!

In my struggles I had almost forgotten the Faces. One of them was gazing at me between my eyes.

Yet this time came no merciful swoon to my relief. Conscious of the horror I stood, gasping; while he no longer an elusive phantom but real, positive, awful, shot the dreadful pain, the paralysing fear, through every tiniest path of my whole being.

Then the supreme, the unutterable pang —and blackness—blackness—blackness.

I came to myself. My quiet friend stood smiling by me.

Well!"—his soft voice wooed my sense to life—"how do you like the vision?"

I was still shaking, sweating, shrivelled by the terror of it all.

You were wise." I replied, "did you call the name of it Death!"

Nay!" he answered, with grave sorrow in his eyes, "methinks its name is Life."