The Web of Maya

By Ella D'Arcy

I

Le Tas is the name of the land lying at the southern extremity of the Isle of Saint Maclou. It would form a separate islet by itself, but that it is joined to the larger one by an isthmus, a wall of rock, of such dizzy height, of such sheer descent, that the narrow road on top gropes falteringly its perilous way from side to side.

The fishermen of Saint Maclou, who are also its farmers, its field-labourers, its coachmen, when driving a party of trippers over to Le Tas, get down at the beginning of the Coupée, as this strange isthmus is called, and, in their courteous broken English, invite their fares to get down too. Then, holding the horse by the bridle, and walking backwards before him, the driver leads him over the Coupée, turning an anxious eye this side and the other, to see that the wheels keep within the meagre limits: for, a careless movement here—a false step—and you would be precipitated down a clear three hundred feet to the sea below. But it is only an experienced fisherman who will take you over the Coupée at all. If a young man happens to be driving, he will send you into

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Le Tas on foot, while he smokes his cigar, as he waits for you in safety at the Saint Maclou end.

Le Tas, as its name suggests, is just a mound or heap of rocks. Flung up there by the sea, ages ago, the same sea has already so undermined it, so under-tunnelled it, that with a few ages more it must crumble in, and sink again to the ocean bed from which it came.

There are very few houses on Saint Maclou ; besides the Seigneurie, the Rectory, and the Belle Vue Hotel, perhaps only some forty homesteads and cottages. On Le Tas there are but five all told. You come upon four of these shortly after crossing the Coupée. Grouped together in a hollow which hides them from the road, they are still further hidden by the trees planted to shelter them from the great westerly gales. But, should you happen to make your way down to them, you would discover a homely and genial picture : little gardens ablaze with flowers, tethered cows munching the grass, fowls clacking, pigeons preening themselves and cooing, children playing on the thresholds, perhaps a woman, in the black sun-bonnet of the Islands, hanging her linen out to dry, between the gnarled apple trees of the little orchard on the right.

When you have left these cottages behind you, Le Tas grows wilder and more barren with every step you take. At first you walk through gorse and bracken ; patches of purple heather contrast with straggling patches of golden ragwort. But, further on, nothing grows from the thin layer of wind-carried soil, save a short grass, spread out like a mantle of worn green velvet, through which bare granite knees and elbows protrude at every point. You see no sign of life, but a goat or two browsing on the steep declivities, the rabbits scudding among the ferns, the rows of cormorants standing in dark sedateness on the rocks below. You hear

hear nothing but the strange complaining cry of the sea-gull, as it floats above your head on wide-spreading motionless wings, and draws, as by an invisible string, a swift-flying shadow far behind it, over the sunny turf.

Here, at the very end of Le Tas, facing the sea, stands the fifth house, a low squalid cottage, or rather a row of cottages, built of wood, and tarred over, with a long, unbroken, shed-like roof of slate. It has no garden, no yard, nor any sort of enclosure, but stands set down barely there upon the grass, as a child sets down a toy-house upon a table.

It was built to lodge the miners, when, forty years since, great hopes were entertained of extracting silver from the granite of Le Tas. Shafts were sunk, a plant imported, a row of half-a-dozen one-roomed cottages run up on the summit of the rock. But the little silver that was found never paid the expenses of working. The mines were long ago abandoned, though the stone chimneys of their shafts still raise their heads among the bracken, and, white-washed over, serve as extra landmarks to the boatmen out at sea.

The cottages had been long disused, or only intermittently inhabited, until, one day, Philip Le Mesurier, of Jersey, called upon the Seigneur, and offered to rent them for himself. It was just after Le Mesurier's six years of unhappy married life had come to an end. Mrs. Le Mesurier had, one night, without any warning, left Rozaine Manor, taking her little son with her, and she had absolutely refused to go back, or to live with her husband again. There had been a great scandal. The noise of it had spread through the islands. It had even reached Saint Maclou. Women said that Le Mesurier had ill-used his wife shamefully, had beaten her before the servants, had habitually permitted himself the most disgusting language. He was known to have the Le Mesurier violent temper ; he was suspected of having the Le Mesurier taste for

for drink. Lily Le Mesurier, on the other hand, was spoken of as the sweetest, the most long-suffering of God's creatures, a martyred angel, against whom, though she was young and pretty, no worse fault could be alleged than that she was "clever" and read "deep" books. A most devoted mother, it was only when she at last realised that she must not expose her child to the daily degradation of his father's example, that she had finally determined upon a step so inexpressibly painful to her feelings as a separation.

A few men shrugged their shoulders; said they should like to hear Le Mesurier's side of the story; but knew they would never hear it, as he was much too proud to stoop to self-excusings.

The Seigneur of Saint Maclou was among those whose sympathies went with Le Mesurier. They had a club acquaintanceship in Jersey. He welcomed him to Saint Maclou; converted the "Barracks," as the cottages on Le Tas were called, into a single house, more or less convenient; and hoped that during the short time Le Mesurier would probably remain on the island, he would come often to the Seigneurie.

The young man thanked him, sent over a little furniture, came himself, with his guns and his fishing tackle, and took up his residence in the Barracks. But he went very seldom to the Seigneurie, where he ran the risk of meeting visitors from Jersey; and when this had happened a second time, he went there no more. And he stayed on at Le Tas long after the reason he had given for his presence—that he had come for a holiday, to sketch, to shoot, to fish—had ceased to find credence. He stayed on through the autumn, through the winter, through the spring; he neither fished, nor shot, nor painted; he held no intercourse with anyone; he lived entirely alone. The only person with whom he ever exchanged a word was Monsieur Chauchat, the French pastor.

pastor. Sometimes, in the evening, Le Mesurier would walk over to Saint Maclou, and smoke a pipe at the Rectory ; sometimes, when the weather was tempting, the old clergyman, who liked him and pitied him, would come up in the afternoon to pay a visit to the Barracks ; but these meetings between them were rare, and, as Le Mesurier grew more moody, and Chauchat more feeble, they became rarer still.

But one day, in the dirty living-room of his cottage, Le Mesurier sat and entertained an unexpected and most unwelcome guest.

Outside the window nothing was visible but whiteness—an opaque, luminous, sun-suffused whiteness, which obliterated earth and sky and sea. For Le Tas, and Saint Maclou, and the whole Island Archipelago, were enveloped in one of those wet and hurrying mists so common here in August. It blew from the north-east ; broke against the high cliffs of Saint Maclou, as a river breaks against a boulder ; overflowed the top ; lay in every valley like some still inland lake ; and, pouring down every headland on the south and west, swept out again to sea.

The cottage on Le Tas, at all times solitary, was this afternoon completely cut off from the rest of the world.

Le Mesurier's living-room, in its dirt and its disorder, showed plainly that no woman ever came there. Unwashed cooking utensils and crockery littered up the hearth and dresser ; the baize cover and cushions of the jonquière, often lain upon, were never shaken or cleaned ; rusting guns, disordered fishing tackle, canvases, a battered oil-paint box, spoke of occupations thrown aside and tastes forgotten. On a table in the window were writing-materials, a couple of dog-eared books, a tobacco-jar, a pipe,

pipe, and a bottle of whisky. These last, of all the articles in the room, alone showed the lustre which comes from frequent use.

The host's appearance matched his surroundings. He wore a dirty flannel shirt, a ragged, paint-stained coat, burst canvas shoes. His hands were unwashed ; his hair and beard were uncombed, and neither had been touched by scissors for the last six months.

The guest, on the contrary, was clean, fragrant, irreproachable at every point ; in a light grey summer suit, and brown boots ; with glossy linen, and glossy, well-kept finger-nails. He had a trick of drawing these together in an even row over the palm of his hand, while he contemplated them admiringly, his head a little on one side. The dabs of light reflected from their surface made them look like a row of polished pink shells. Le Mesurier remembered this trick of old, and hated Shergold for it, but not more than he hated him for everything else.

Shergold, on his arrival, had asked for something to eat ; and Le Mesurier had taken bread and cheese from the cupboard, and flung them down on the table before him, and had filled a great tin jug—one of the curious tin jugs never seen elsewhere than in the Islands—with cider from the cask in the corner.

"Yes," Shergold was saying, "we were two hours late ; and, but that old Hamon piloted us, we might never have got here at all. I don't believe any one but Hamon could have kept us off the rocks to-day. I only hope we shall make better time going back, or I shall lose the boat for Jersey. That would mean staying in Jacques-le-Port until Monday, and I'm anxious to get to Lily at once. She will be so glad to know I have seen you, to hear all about you."

Le Mesurier's dull, quiescent hate sprang suddenly into activity. He felt he could have throttled the man who sat so calmly on the other side of the table, eating, and speaking between his mouthfuls

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of Le Mesurier's wife. He could have throttled him for the unctuous correctness of his appearance, for his conventional, meaningless good looks, for those empty, showy eyes of his, which the fools who believed in him called "flashing" and "intellectual;" he could have throttled him for the air of self-satisfaction, of complacency, breathed by his whole person; he could have throttled him for the amiable lie he had just told of Lily's anxiety for news of himself, her husband. All Lily was anxious to hear, of course, was that Shergold had obtained Le Mesurier's consent to the business proposition over which they had been corresponding for so long, and which to-day was the occasion of Shergold's visit.

But he concealed his rage, and only showed his surprise at hearing that Lily was again in Jersey. For one of the many subjects of disagreement between her and himself, one of their many causes of quarrel, had been her persistent detestation of Jersey.

Shergold explained: "Yes. I hadn't time to mention it in my last letter; but Lily left London on Monday, and has gone to some very nice rooms I was able to secure for her at Beaumont. In fact, my old rooms—you will remember them—when I was at the College."

"She might at least have gone home," said Le Mesurier, with bitterness, "since I'm not there to contaminate the place. Rozaine, as she knows, is always at her service."

"Ah, yes—of course—thank you—you are very kind. But the air at Rozaine is hardly sufficiently bracing. You see, it's on account of the boy. He has been overworking at his studies, and needs sea-bathing, tonic, ozone."

The impertinence of Shergold's thanks might have stung Le Mesurier to an angry retort, but that the mention of his little

son, whom he had not seen for more than a year, turned his thoughts and feelings upon a different bent. He caught himself wishing that he could have him out here on Le Tas. The keen air, the free, out-of-door, wholesome life, would soon put health into the body, and colour into the pale little face, that rose so vividly before the father's mind. Another of the causes of dissension between Le Mesurier and Lily had been the system, inspired by Shergold, which she had rigorously insisted upon following in the training and education of the child. Every day had its regular set programme of lessons and of play ; but the play consisted of formal exercise—"Calisthenics," as Shergold termed it—which at stated hours the boy was obliged to accomplish ; so that, to his constrained young spirit, it no doubt became as irksome as a task. And then, Shergold, though a hearty consumer of butcher's meat in practice, was, in theory, a convinced vegetarian ; and Lily, despite her husband's most earnest, most violent opposition, would allow little Phil no stronger nourishment than such as might be contained in beans and lentils.

Le Mesurier spoke aloud, impulsively. "Lily might send Phil to me for a few weeks, I think. It would do him all the good in the world. It is much healthier here than at Beaumont."

Shergold raised his eyebrows, and took a comprehensive glance round the unswept, uncleaned, undusted room.

"Oh, I'd have a woman in. I'd have all this set right," said the father, eagerly.

"You can hardly be serious," answered Shergold. "You know Lily's views. You could hardly expect her to let Phil stop here alone with you."

Le Mesurier flushed angrily.

"After all, he's my own child. If I chose to assert my rights —if I should insist on having him——"

"Oh,

"Oh, your rights!" interrupted Shergold. "Come, come. You're forgetting our agreement. The boy remains in his mother's care, and under her control, till he's one-and-twenty, and you're not to interfere."

"But it was understood that I could see him whenever I wished."

"And so you can. But you must *go* to see him; Lily can't let him leave her, to come to you. If you choose to exile yourself to Le Tas, and lead this solitary, half-savage sort of life, you can't complain that you're prevented from seeing Phil. It's your own fault. You ought to be living at Rozaine."

"Tell my wife what she ought or ought not to do, since she's fool enough to listen to you," broke out Le Mesurier hotly, "and be damned to you both! I shall do as I please. What business is it of yours where or how I live?"

Shergold shrugged his shoulders.

"You appear to be as violent in temper, and as unrestrained in language, as ever," he said calmly. "A pretty example you'd set your son! But we're straying from the point. Let's give our attention to the business that brought me here, and get it done with." He drew a large envelope from the inner breast-pocket of his coat.

"You may save yourself the trouble of opening that," Le Mesurier informed him. "Let Lily send me the boy for a month, and I'll consider the matter. Under present conditions, I refuse even to discuss it with you."

"Nonsense," said Shergold. "You know she won't send you the boy. The notion is preposterous. Now, as for these papers——"

"I refuse to discuss the matter," Le Mesurier repeated. "Send me Phil, and we'll see. But, until then, I refuse to discuss it with

with you. If Lily hesitates, use your influence with her," he added sardonically. "The notion's preposterous, if you like, but you've persuaded her to more preposterous courses still, before now. You've persuaded her to leave her husband, to give up her position, her duties; you've persuaded her to go and live in London, to be near you, to complete her education, to develop her individuality, and a lot of damned rot of that sort. Well, now, persuade her to this. Persuade her to let me have the boy for a time. Persuade her that it's for Phil's own good. And tell her roundly that I refuse absolutely to hold any kind of business discussions with either her or her agent, until I've got the boy."

"You're mad, Le Mesurier. It is I, as you know, who have consistently advised Lily, on the contrary, to remove the boy as far as possible from your influence. If you are serious in asking me now to urge her to let him come here, and live alone with you, day in and day out, for a month—really, you must be mad."

"Very good. Mad or not, you have heard my last word. And if you cannot see your way to meeting my wishes in the matter, I don't know that there's anything that need detain you here longer."

He looked significantly from Shergold to the door. The mist was lifting a little. A pale sun was just visible behind it, a disc of gold shining through a veil; and here and there, through rifts, one could catch glimpses of faint blue sky.

Shergold, vexed, hesitant, looked at his watch.

"You're wasting precious time," he said, impatiently. "What's the use of opening old sores? You know our decision about the child is irrevocably fixed. You yourself assented to it long ago. What's the sense of letting this new idea of yours—this freak—this whim, to have him here—interfere with business

of

of importance—business about which I've taken the trouble to pay you this altogether distasteful visit?"

But Le Mesurier merely opened the door, and with a gesture invited Shergold to pass out. His expression was so menacing, his gesture might so easily have transformed itself into the preparation for a blow, that Shergold instinctively moved towards the threshold.

"You refuse to consider the matter?" he asked.

"Let Lily send the boy, and I'll consider it."

"That's your last word?"

"No!" shouted Le Mesurier, suddenly losing all control of himself. "Go to Hell, you sneaking Jesuit! That's my last word." Then, finding a certain childish joy in the mere calling of names—the mere utterance of his hate, his fury: "You empty wind-bag! You low-bred pedant! You bloated mass of self-conceit! Go to Hell!"

And he flung the door to, in Shergold's astonished face.

Le Mesurier stood alone in the cottage, shaken by impotent rage. His thoughts followed Shergold going away; unsuccessful, indeed, but superior, calm, self-satisfied; full of a lofty contempt, a Pharisaic pity, for Le Mesurier's violence, for his childishness, his ineffectual profanity, his miserable mode of life. Le Mesurier could imagine Shergold telling Lily of her husband's churlish refusal to discuss the business that had taken him to Saint Maclou; of the impossible condition he had imposed; of his dirty surroundings, his neglected appearance, his brutal language, his ungovernable temper. Le Mesurier saw the disgust such a narration would inspire in his wife, the fresh justification she would find in it for all her past conduct. And he imagined how, while Shergold and Lily

Lily talked him over, Phil, the child, his son, would catch a word here and there, as children do, and would unconsciously conceive a prejudice against his father, which would influence him through life. . . . God! it was unendurable. Was there no way? . . . .

Then, all at once, he laughed. An idea had begun to push its head insidiously up from among the confusion of his thoughts. The idea surprised him, pleased him, tempted him; and, as he contemplated it, he laughed. . . .

In a moment he opened the door and hurried out, after Shergold.

The sun was again hidden, the blue rifts had closed, the mist was thicker than before. But, a little distance ahead, a dark form was silhouetted on the whiteness; and, thrilling with excitement, in a glow of irresponsible gaiety, Le Mesurier, following noiselessly over the grass, kept this form in view.

Along the meandering foot-worn track, which leads from the Barracks back over Le Tas; down through the gorse and bracken; on through the lane that skirts the tree-sheltered cottages; and so to the beginning of the Coupée, where the land falls away, and nothing is left but the narrow road that creeps tremulously over the top of the rock wall, three hundred feet high, with a precipice on either side, and the sea at the bottom: Le Mesurier stealthily followed Shergold.

And when the middle of the Coupée was reached, Le Mesurier knew that the moment had come. He acted promptly. Before there was time for speech between the men, the thing was done, and he stood there on the road alone—a startled broken cry still ringing in his ears; then, after what seemed a long interval of silence, a splash, a far-away muffled splash, from deep below, as if he had dropped a stone, wrapped in a blanket, into the water.

Le Mesurier waited till the silence grew round and complete again.

again. And presently he turned away light-heartedly, and walked back to the Barracks.

II

He was glad, very glad, that his enemy was dead.

This was the thought, this the feeling—a feeling of gladness, a thought, "But I am glad, glad, glad!"—which kept him company all the succeeding days.

The knowledge that he would never have to see him again—never again look upon his fatuous, handsome face—never again listen to his voice, his smooth, even, complacent voice — this knowledge poured through him with warm comfort.

He would lie out on the grass, in the sun, revelling in a sensasation of well-being that was almost physical, and rehearsing in memory the events as they had happened: Shergold's arrival, their conversation, Shergold's departure; the great, good, satisfying outburst of vituperation with which Le Mesurier had pursued him from his threshold; and then that brief moment of soul-filling consummation, of tangible, ponderable joy, on the Coupée.

Remorse? No, he did not feel the slightest remorse. "Remorse?—I thought a man who had killed another always felt remorse," he said to himself, with a vague sort of surprise, but with very certain exultation. Hitherto, he had accepted tacitly the conventional teachings on the subject. Bloodguiltiness must be followed by remorse, as certainly as night by morning. The slayer destroyed, along with his victim, his own peace for ever. He could no more enjoy food, rest, or pleasant indolence. And sleep —"Macbeth has murdered sleep!" He must always be haunted by the reproachful phantom of the dead, and shaken by continual ague-fits of terror, gnawed by perpetual dread, lest his crime should be discovered

discovered and brought home to him. These were the ready-made notions the truth of which Le Mesurier had taken for granted: but now he had tested them; he had tested them, and behold, they were false. After all, he told himself, every man's experience is individual; you can learn nothing from books, nothing from the experience of others. Hearsay evidence is worthless. "I am a murderer, as it is called. I should inevitably be hanged if they could prove the thing against me. And yet—remorse?" No; he felt himself to be a thousand times happier, a thousand times easier in his mind, a thousand times more contented, more at peace, than he had ever been in the days of his innocence. In killing Shergold, he had simply removed an intolerable burden from his spirit.

He found himself singing, whistling, scraps of opera, snatches of old ballads, as he went about the daily routine of preparing his food, or as he wandered hither and thither over the scant sun-burned grass of the islet. After all, Shergold had well-deserved his fate. It was owing to him that Le Mesurier's life was ruined, his home broken up, his boy separated from him, his wife's affections alienated. It was thanks to Shergold that he had come here, more than a year ago, to lead the life of a misanthrope, alone in this melancholy cottage on Le Tas.

And yet, Shergold was not his wife's lover; had never been her lover; never, Le Mesurier knew, had desired to be her lover. He thought he could almost have forgiven Shergold more easily if he *had* been her lover; the situation would have seemed, somehow, less abnormal than the actual one. But Shergold had got at her intellectually, had seduced her mind, had subjugated her spiritually. He had known her before her marriage, ever since she was a girl of sixteen. He had given her lessons in Greek, in mathematics. Possibly, had he not been a married man himself at the time, he might

might have thought of marrying her. But it was after her marriage, and after his own wife's death, about a year afterwards, that his ascendancy over her became marked, that his constant presence at Rozaine began vaguely to irritate Le Mesurier.

He was such a cold, self-righteous, solemn, pompous pedant, and withal such an ass, so shallow, so empty, so *null*, Le Mesurier felt. His pose of mental superiority was so unwarranted, so odious. He betrayed in a hundred inflections of his voice, in perpetual supercilious upliftings of his eyebrows, the contempt he entertained for Lily's husband, as for a mere eating, drinking, sport-loving animal, without culture, without fineness, without acquirements, but unfairly endowed by Fortune with large estates and a charming wife ; a wife who, in other hands, with a wise and discerning helpmeet, might (to use one of Shergold's own irritating catch-words), "have raised the pyramid of self-culture to the highest point." Shergold imagined himself to be like Goethe, to resemble him physically, as well as temperamentally, and in the character of his mind ; and he was constantly adopting, and adapting to the exigencies of the moment, tag-ends of the poet's phrases. He had a deep-seated, intimate conviction—a conviction based not on evidence, not on experience, not on work accomplished, but born, full-fledged, of his own instinctive egotism—that he was, not merely a clever man, not merely a man of uncommon parts, but a Great Man, a Man of transcendent Genius. It was as a Man of Genius that Lily Le Mesurier looked up to him ; it was as a Man of Genius that he looked down upon Lily Le Mesurier's husband. And yet Philip, modest enough, and unpretentious, could not help realising in his heart, that, of the two, he himself was, in point of real native intelligence, the better man.

Shergold displayed a silent commiseration for Lily which infuriated Le Mesurier. He taught her to commiserate herself.

She

She turned to him for sympathy in all her imagined troubles ; she sought his advice on every point. She put the management of the child virtually into his hands. He was always at Rozaine. He came up there every day, directly his duties at the College left him free. Lily kept him to dinner three or four times a week. If Le Mesurier grumbled, she complained that he grudged her her only amusement—good conversation ; that, save Professor Shergold, she never met any one worth listening to, worth talking to. He was the only man who understood her. Life was dull enough, Heaven knew, at Rozaine ; and, if Philip was going to object to the Professor's visits, she would not be able to live there at all. It was an effective threat, the value of which Lily thoroughly appreciated, a threat she did not scruple to employ as often as occasion demanded, that she would "not be able to go on living at Rozaine ;" for Le Mesurier had a dumb passion for the place, and an immense pride in it : it was his home, his birthplace, it had been in his family for generations. His love for Lily was a passion too. To live at Rozaine with her—with children possibly —he had pictured to himself as the ideal of absolute happiness. He could as little imagine himself living anywhere else, as he could imagine himself living without Lily. So what could he do but submit, and confirm Lily's constant invitations to Shergold, with such cordiality as he could feign, and sit silent at the head of his table, while these two talked radicalism, agnosticism, blatant futilities, cheap enthusiasms of all sorts ? The Emancipation of Woman, the Abolition of Monarchy, State Socialism, Disestablishment. . . . And Le Mesurier was conservative, as all the Islanders are, and religious as men go. That is to say, he honoured the Church in which he had been brought up, and in which all those whom he had cared for had lived and died.

It troubled him, therefore, that, when little Phil began to talk, Lily

Lily protested against the child's being taught any prayers. The Professor, she said, held it criminal to fill a child's mind with discredited theologies. No mention of the Christian Myth should be permitted in his presence till he was old enough to judge, to discriminate for himself. "It was just as criminal as it would be to offer him innutritious or deleterious food for his physical sustenance," Shergold explained. When Phil was three years old, Le Mesurier put his foot down, and declared that the child must be brought up a Christian. There was a great scene, at the end of which Le Mesurier's anger exploded in curses; and Lily seized the opportunity for the appropriate sneer that "if that sort of language was Christian, she preferred the language of Atheists." Shergold urged, "But my dear fellow! Be reasonable. You don't want to teach your son demoralising superstitions. The existence of a God, the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth—I can prove to you the absurdity of both in five minutes, if you will listen. It's monstrous to instil such unscientific and pernicious dogmas into the brain of a three-year-old infant." Le Mesurier took Phil on his knee, alone in the nursery, and taught him the simple prayer he himself had used as a child.

After their discussion, and Le Mesurier's burst of profanity, Shergold had left the house in injured dignity; and Lily had retired to her room, and remained there for forty-eight hours. At the end of that time Le Mesurier was reduced to submission. Lily insisted on his going down to the College, and bringing the Professor back to dinner. The old footing was resumed, and things went from bad to infinitely worse. Every periodic outbreak on Le Mesurier's part was more violent than the last, and every reparation exacted from him was more galling. The legend of his violence, of his ill-conduct, began to spread about the Island, and to form one of the chosen themes of gossip at the club, and

and at St. Hélier's tea-parties. The absolutely platonic nature of the Professor's relations with Lily seemed to be understood, for in a place where scandal is peculiarly rife, their friendship never excited any.

In the course of six years Le Mesurier had become a cipher in his own house, and Shergold ruled by suggestion in small things as well as in great. Le Mesurier covered an intolerable hatred with a sullen and morose manner, and had endured with apparent insensibility many keener mortifications than the one which finally brought matters to a crisis.

He had come home tired one day from the golf links, and found Shergold, as usual, discoursing to Lily in the drawing-room. Le Mesurier threw himself into an easy chair, conscious of no more than his habitual annoyance. The drawing-room tea had been taken away, and it wanted about half-an-hour to dinner. Shergold commented on his fagged appearance, and offered him refreshment.

"Come now, do take a glass of wine," he said, "or some brandy and soda;" with all the cordial civility of a man dispensing hospitality from his own hearth-rug. "Let me ring for it."

But before he could touch the bell, Le Mesurier was on his feet, his temper boiling over, his mouth spluttering forth indignant protestations. The infernal insolence of the man, to play the host to him in his own house! "By God," he cried, "I think this really is the limit!"

The Professor, always coldly superior, and deaf to Lily's entreaties where his own dignity was at stake, took up his hat, and left the room. A moment later he was passing before the windows on his way to the lodge-gates.

Then came a scene with Lily, more shattering than anything Le Mesurier could have imagined. In her cool little voice, she said the

the cruellest things. Her tongue cut like the lash of a cunningly contrived whip, and she brought it down again and again on the most sensitive places of his soul ; those secret places which no mere enemy could have discovered, but which, because of his love for her, he had exposed fearlessly to her mercy. His pain turned to anger : his anger became really a brief madness. He had suddenly found himself standing over her, holding her by the shoulder, shaking her violently. "Damn you, you little devil!" he had shouted, and his fingers had thrilled to strike her on her pale provocative face ; but instinct, rather than deliberate forbearance, had saved him from this, and he had gripped her shoulder instead. Then at that very moment the door had opened, and Harris had entered to announce dinner. She had stood and looked at him with narrowing, malignant eyes—God, those eyes he had so worshipped!—"You need not strike me before the servants," she had said, just as though he had been in the habit of striking her, and she had raised her clear voice a little, obviously that the man might hear. Le Mesurier had hastily moved back a step, but his cuff-link had caught in the filmy stuff that filled in the neck of her dress, and a portion of it had torn away, and hung in a long fluttering strip from his sleeve. She had made no movement to cover her bare neck ; on the contrary, she pushed up her shoulder through the gap, and turned her eyes, now tender, grieving eyes, to look at the five angry crimson marks rising up on the white skin. Harris, of course, had seen them plainly too. She had refused to go into dinner, she had gone to her room ; when, later, Le Mesurier went there to ask forgiveness, he could not find her. The boy's crib in the next room was empty. His wife had left Rozaine, and taken the child with her. She had gone to an hotel in St. Hélier's for the night, and left for her father's house in England the next morning.

She

She had steadfastly refused to return, and Shergold had supported her in her refusal. He had shortly after this given up his appointment at Saint Hélier's for a better one in London, where he had lived near Lily, influencing her as much as ever, seeing her, doubtless, every day. In the few letters which Lily had written her husband since the separation—letters dealing always with points of business, with money arrangements, rendered necessary by their altered relations—Le Mesurier recognised, in the cold, judicial tone, the well-arranged phrases, Shergold's guiding hand. He at first had answered them briefly, latterly not at all, and it was his final persistent silence which had brought his enemy in person to Le Tas, and delivered him into his hands.—Oh, he was glad he had killed him! Shergold had ruined his life, and he had taken Shergold's. They were quits at last. No, he felt no remorse.

But neither did he feel any fear; and this surprised him, for that the transgressor should fear discovery and retribution was within every man's experience. He began to ask himself how this was, and he came to believe that it arose from the fact that he had in reality no cause for fear. Discovery was practically an impossibility. In the first place, no one knew that Shergold had come to Saint Maclou at all. He had told Le Mesurier it was a sudden idea which had occurred to him during dinner, on which he had acted the same night. Then the boat had been so late, that, to save time, he had not gone into the hotel, where he might have been remembered, but had come up to Le Tas over the cliffs, without notice or recognition from anybody. That he should have been seen between leaving the cottage and reaching the Coupée was impossible. Le Mesurier had followed him closely enough

enough all the way to know that no one else had been at any time in sight. So thick was the mist, that a third person, to have seen him at all, must have passed within arm's length. From all danger of an eye-witness to his being in Shergold's company, or to the supreme moment on the Coupée, Le Mesurier felt secure.

But there was the chance that the body might be recovered. It might be washed up on the Island or elsewhere. The body of young Hamon, who had fallen from the cliffs the previous summer, while searching for gulls' eggs, had been found three weeks later, so far away as the Isle of Wight. It had been unrecognisable, for the face was completely destroyed, but it had been identified by a pocket-knife with the lad's name engraved upon the haft. Le Mesurier wondered whether there was anything on Shergold's person to identify him. Letters? The water would have reduced these to pulp. A ring? The hands and fingers were always the parts first attacked by the fish.

He recalled the gruesome stories told by the boatmen as they row you from point to point, or which the women repeat to each other during the long winter evenings as they sit over the peat fires: stories of the cave-crabs, of the voracious fish which swarm round these coasts; of the mackerel which come in shoals, hundreds of thousands strong, roughening the calm sea like a wind, making a noise like thunder or the engines of some great steamer, as they cut through the surface of the water in pursuit of the little fish that fly before them. One story goes that a man swimming out from Grève de la Mauve unwittingly struck into such a shoal, and in an instant was pulled down by a million tenacious mouths and never seen again. . . . No, there was not much fear that Shergold's body would be found.

But even supposing the body were found and were recognised; even supposing Shergold's movements could be traced to Saint Maclou,

Maclou, that his visit to Le Mesurier could be proved: there was no iota of evidence to connect Le Mesurier with his death. Le Mesurier's policy would be frankly to acknowledge the visit, to describe how Shergold had left him, and to call to remembrance the mist which had prevailed on that day. What more natural than that Shergold should have met with a misadventure on the way back, have walked over the cliff's edge instead of keeping to the path, have missed his footing and fallen from the Coupée? Such misadventures were constantly happening, even among the fishermen. There was not a point on the Island which was not already the scene of some such tragedy. Le Mesurier assured himself he had no cause for fear.

But as the days and weeks went by, what did surprise him exceedingly was that he received no communication from Lily to acquaint him with the Professor's disappearance. It had seemed certain that she would write. For long ago Shergold must have been missed; first by his landlady, then by his friends. There would have been much speculation, anxious enquiries, newspaper paragraphs, in which his person would be described, a reward offered. Then, as time went on, and nothing was heard of him, the anxiety must have grown. There must have been an immense noise, a tremendous amount of talk. For he was, in his way, a well-known man, a person of consideration; he held a responsible post. Le Mesurier never saw a newspaper; not more than a dozen, perhaps, were read in the whole of Saint Maclou, and these were chiefly local papers from Jacques-le-Port; but he could imagine the excitement of the London Press, the articles which were being written on the subject, the letters, the suggestions, which every day must be bringing forth.

And

And nevertheless, Le Mesurier received no notification from Lily; no news of any sort, no rumour touching Shergold's fate was ever carried to Le Tas. The strangeness of such a silence could only confirm him in the belief that Shergold had spoken to no one of his intended journey to Saint Maclou, and he again told himself he was absolutely safe. He turned to dismiss the subject from his mind.

But he found to his astonishment that he could not dismiss it, that it had become a fixed idea, an obsession, which overpowered his will. He was as impotent to chase Shergold from his waking thoughts as from his troubled nightly dreams. If he looked up suddenly to the window, it was because he fancied he had seen Shergold's head passing rapidly by; if he caught himself listening intently in the stillness, he knew a moment later that it was because he fancied Shergold had spoken, and that the vibrations of his voice still shook the air. It was a horrible disappointment to learn that instead of ridding himself of Shergold, as he had hoped, he seemed to have bound himself up with him inseparably for ever. While he had been alive, Le Mesurier, once out of his presence, had often forgotten him for days at a time; now that he was dead, Le Mesurier could think of nothing else.

But a more curious development was, that as time went by, he noticed that his old, hearty, satisfying hatred for the man was fading away. Does not absence always weaken hatred? And when you realise the absence to be eternal, to be the immutable absence of death, is not hatred extinguished? Love is stronger than death, for love is positive, affirmative. But hatred? Hatred is negative; hatred is a manifestation of the transitory Nay, not of the everlasting Yea. Is it possible to hate the dead?

Le Mesurier no longer hated the man he had killed. A faint, hesitant sort of consideration, even of fellow-feeling for him, began gradually to edge its way in among his thoughts. He would sometimes try to put himself in Shergold's place; he would try to reconstruct the past from Shergold's point of view.

He found he could no longer persuade himself that Shergold had been conscious of the evil he had wrought. On the contrary, he recognised that the man had been honest according to his lights; that he had committed no crime against the accepted code. He might have acquired his influence over Lily, through no wish, no effort of his own. He had been one of those showy characters whom women always worship; he had possessed that superficial glittering cleverness that always catches a woman's fancy, he had talked with the fluent self-assurance which always wins a woman's approval. Probably he had never realised how obnoxious his presence at Rozaine was to Le Mesurier. He was sufficiently proud to have withdrawn from a society where he was not wanted, but his self-conceit was too magnificent for him ever to imagine such a contingency possible. And then, no doubt, his sense of conscious rectitude had rendered him particularly obtuse. Had he been playing the rôle of lover, a guilty conscience would have made him more sensitive to Le Mesurier's uncordial attitude. Looking back upon it all now, Le Mesurier could almost pity him for such blindness.

One day, lying in a hollow of the cliff, hidden from every eye but that of cormorant or sea-gull, playing abstractedly with a pebble which found itself under his fingers, he saw a yard away from him a sharp-nosed, grey-coated mole running from one point to another across the grass. He shot the pebble from his hand, and

and the little beast rolled over dead. He took it up, and looked at it curiously. He smoothed with his fingers its warm, velvety coat. He was sorry he had killed it. A second ago it had been enjoying the sunshine, the warm air, its own sense of well-being. And now it was utterly destroyed, utterly annihilated, and no one could restore to it the life which he had wantonly taken.

The thought of Shergold, always present at the back of his mind, pressed forward imperatively. Shergold had not believed in soul or immortality. He had believed that with death the life of a man comes to an end, just as does the life of a mouse. Le Mesurier had often listened, perforce, to his dogmatising on such views to Lily ; to his proclaiming that each individual life is but a flash of light between two eternities of darkness ; that just as the body returns to the elements from which it came, so the spirit is reabsorbed into the forces and energies which move the world. And because Shergold had no belief in another life, he had set an immense value upon this one. In his self-engrossed, pedantic way, he had thoroughly enjoyed every hour, every moment of it. Supposing his views were true, then the greatest injury one could inflict on such a man would be to deprive him of this life which he prized, suddenly to extinguish him like a candle, to annihilate him like this poor little mole.

He laid the body of the mole down upon the turf, and walked away. He no longer sang or whistled to himself. The monotonous days seemed intolerably long.

III

Three months had gone by. Le Mesurier, in the solitude of Le Tas, had suffered every pang a guilty conscience can inflict, had been through every phase of remorse and of despair.

The

The burden on his mind was growing intolerably heavy. Every moment it cried out to him that he must share it with another, or be crushed beneath its weight. He would have gone down to see the Pastor, but that to do so he must cross the Coupée. He had not the courage actually to pass the spot from which his thoughts were never long absent. And while his mind tossed distressfully this way and that, Monsieur Chauchat chanced to come up to see him.

The sight of a real human face, the sound of a real human voice, unlocked his heart, set his tongue going. In spite of the old man's many attempted interruptions, he poured out the whole story ; all the injuries, real or fancied, he had received at Shergold's hands, his own hatred for him, the man's fate, his own impotent repentance. "And now," he said, simply, when he had concluded, "I wish to give myself up. Tell me what I am to do."

Chauchat looked at him with infinite pity, and showed neither horror nor surprise. Le Mesurier was even conscious of a certain movement of indignation within his own bosom, that any one should hear of the murder of a fellow-creature so composedly.

"You must give up this kind of life," said the Pastor gently. "It is terribly bad for you. You must have society, you must travel."

Le Mesurier was amazed at such irrelevance. He looked at Chauchat curiously. He thought him aged, whiter, feebler than ever before. He wondered whether he still had all his faculties. And he answered impatiently, "But what has that to do with what I have been telling you ?"

"You must take care," said the old man ; "solitude brings delusions, hallucinations ; to indulge in them is to shake the mind's stability. You must come back into the world. You must mix with other men."

He

He divined that Chauchat believed him to be dreaming. This was natural perhaps; how could the good, simple-minded old clergyman believe in the reality of such a crime? But he must convince him of the miserable truth. He must begin again and describe it all more circumstantially. He must go on until he saw conviction dawn in the eyes that now looked at him with such friendly pity, until he saw that pity change to aversion and fear. He began over again.

But Chauchat laid a hand upon his arm.

"One moment! You say you killed this man?"

"Yes, I killed him."

"You threw him over the Coupee?"

"I followed him from the house, and threw him over the Coupée."

"No, my poor boy; no, no, no! Thank God, you did not. Thank God, you are dreaming. You have had some strange, some horrible delusion. But Shergold is alive, is well, I have but just now come from him. He, indeed, is the reason of my visit. I come as a messenger from him, a mediator between him and you."

Le Mesurier sat there stunned, dazed, vacant. Was Chauchat mad? The old man's voice buzzed in his ears; he was still talking, explaining how Shergold had come over by the morning's boat; how he had called at the parsonage, and told the story of his last visit to Le Mesurier, of the deed of assignment, and of Le Mesurier's refusal to sign it; of the pressing need there was that it should be signed; how he had begged Chauchat to use his influence with Le Mesurier, and so Chauchat was here, while Shergold was staying till to-morrow at the Belle Vue Hotel, and was quite prepared to meet Le Mesurier on amicable terms, if he would go down there and see him.

Was

Was Chauchat mad? Yes, clearly. How otherwise could he imagine that he had come from Shergold, that he had spoken with a dead man? Shergold's death—that was the one certain fact in all this bewildering world. He had sat there, at the table, just where Chauchat was seated now. They had quarrelled. Le Mesurier had followed him from that very door, out into the mist. . . .

But all at once a point of doubt pierced his soul. *Had* he followed Shergold? Had he in truth followed Shergold out into the mist?

Was Chauchat mad? Or—or—was he mad himself? Something inside his head throbbed so violently, he could not even think. He sat stunned and dazed by the table holding his head in his hands, while the old man talked on. But while he sat there in dumb, inert confusion, his sub-conscious brain was at work, rearranging the past, disentangling the threads of illusion from those of reality, arranging these on this side, those on that, clearly, unmistakably. And when all was ready, suddenly the web of deception fell from before his eyes, and he saw clearly. Up to the moment of Shergold's leaving the cottage all had passed as he remembered it: the rest had been a mere phantasmal creation of his own brain.

His hands were clean of blood, he had committed no crime, he might go where he chose, he was guiltless, he was free. . . . . And—and during all the past months, when he had been tortured with self-condemnations, Shergold had been living his usual happy, respectable and respected life, seeing Lily every day, seeing the child . . . . Oh! . . . . Le Mesurier's feelings underwent a complete revulsion; his remorse shrivelled up, his pity vanished, his old hatred returned reinforced a thousandfold—and he was filled with regret, a gnawing, an intolerable regret that his hand had failed to accomplish the sin which his heart had desired.