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The Flight of the Shadow

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I.	MRS: DAY BEGINS THE STORY
CHAPTER II.	MISS MARTHA MOON
CHAPTER III.	MY UNCLE
CHAPTER IV.	MY UNCLE'S ROOM, AND MY UNCLE IN IT
CHAPTER V.	MY FIRST SECRET
CHAPTER VI.	I LOSE MYSELF
CHAPTER VII.	THE MIRROR
CHAPTER VIII.	THANATOS AND ZOE
CHAPTER IX.	THE GARDEN
CHAPTER X.	ONCE MORE A SECRET
CHAPTER XI.	THE MOLE BURROWS
CHAPTER XII.	A LETTER
CHAPTER XIII.	OLD LOVE AND NEW
CHAPTER XIV.	MOTHER AND UNCLE
CHAPTER XV.	THE TIME BETWEEN
CHAPTER XVI.	FAULT AND NO FAULT
CHAPTER XVII.	THE SUMMONS
CHAPTER XVIII.	JOHN SEES SOMETHING
CHAPTER XIX.	JOHN IS TAKEN ILL

CHAPTER XX. A STRANGE VISIT

CHAPTER XXI. A FOILED ATTEMPT

CHAPTER XXII. JOHN RECALLS AND REMEMBERS

CHAPTER XXIII. LETTER AND ANSWER

CHAPTER XXIV. HAND TO HAND

CHAPTER XXV. A VERY STRANGE THING

CHAPTER XXVI. THE EVIL DRAWS NIGHER

CHAPTER XXVII. AN ENCOUNTER

CHAPTER XXVIII. ANOTHER VISION

CHAPTER XXIX. MOTHER AND SON

CHAPTER XXX. ONCE MORE, AND YET AGAIN

CHAPTER XXXI. MY UNCLE COMES HOME

CHAPTER XXXII. TWICE TWO IS ONE

CHAPTER XXXIII. HALF ONE IS ONE

CHAPTER XXXIV. THE STORY OF MY TWIN UNCLES

CHAPTER XXXV. UNCLE EDMUND'S APPENDIX

CHAPTER XXXVI. THE END OF THE FIRST VOLUME

THE FLIGHT OF THE SHADOW.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. DAY BEGINS THE STORY.

I am old, else, I think, I should not have the courage to tell the story I am going to tell. All those concerned in it about whose feelings I am careful, are gone where, thank God, there are no secrets! If they know what I am doing, I know they do not mind. If they were alive to read as I record, they might perhaps now and again look a little paler and wish the leaf turned, but to see the things set down would not make them unhappy: they do not love secrecy. Half the misery in the world comes from trying to look, instead of trying to be, what one is not. I would that not God only but all good men and women might see me through and through. They would not be pleased with everything they saw, but then neither am I, and I would have no coals of fire in my soul's pockets! But my very nature would shudder at the thought of letting one person that loved a secret see into it. Such a one never sees things as they are—would not indeed see what was there, but something shaped and coloured after his own likeness. No one who loves and chooses a secret can be of the pure in heart that shall see God.

Yet how shall I tell even who I am? Which of us is other than a secret to all but God! Which of us can tell, with poorest approximation, what he or she is! Not to touch the mystery of life—that one who is not myself has made me able to say *I*, how little can any of us tell about even those ancestors whose names we know, while yet the nature, and still more the character, of hundreds of them, have shared in determining what *I* means every time one of us utters the word! For myself, I remember neither father nor mother, nor one of their fathers or mothers: how little then can I say as to what I am!

But I will tell as much as most of my readers, if ever I have any, will care to know.

I come of a long yeoman-line of the name of Whichcote. In Scotland the Whichcotes would have been called *lairds*; in England they were not called *squires*. Repeatedly had younger sons of it risen to rank and honour, and in several generations would his property have entitled the head of the family to rank as a squire, but at the time when I began to be aware of existence, the family possessions had dwindled to one large farm, on which I found myself. Naturally, while some of the family had risen, others had sunk in the social scale; and of the latter was Miss Martha Moon, far more to my life than can appear in my story. I should imagine there are few families in England covering a larger range of social difference than ours. But I begin to think the chief difficulty in writing a book must be to keep out what does not belong to it.

I may mention, however, my conviction, that I owe many special delights to the gradual development of my race in certain special relations to the natural ways of the world. That I was myself brought up in such relations, appears not enough to account for the intensity of my pleasure in things belonging to simplest life—in everything of the open air, in animals of all kinds, in the economy of field and meadow and moor. I can no more understand my delight in the sweet breath of a cow, than I can explain the process by which, that day in the garden—but I must not forestall, and will say rather—than I can account for the tears which, now I am an old woman, fill my eyes just as they used when I was a child, at sight of the year's first primrose. A harebell, much as I have always loved harebells, never moved me that way! Some will say the cause, whatever it be, lies in my nature, not in my ancestry; that, anyhow, it must have come first to some one—and why not to me? I answer, Everything lies in everyone of us, but has to be brought to the surface. It grows a little in one, more in that one's child, more in that child's child, and so on and on—with curious breaks as of a river which every now and then takes to an underground course. One thing I am sure of—that, however any good thing came, I did not make it; I can only be glad and thankful that in me it came to the surface, to tell me how beautiful must he be who thought of it, and made it in me. Then surely one is nearer, if not to God himself, yet

to the things God loves, in the country than amid ugly houses—things that could not have been invented by God, though he made the man that made them. It is not the fashionable only that love the town and not the country; the men and women who live in dirt and squalor—their counterparts in this and worse things far more than they think—are afraid of loneliness, and hate God's lovely dark.

CHAPTER II.

MISS MARTHA MOON.

Let me look back and see what first things I first remember!

All about my uncle first; but I keep him to the last. Next, all about Rover, the dog—though for roving, I hardly remember him away from my side! Alas, he did not live to come into the story, but I must mention him here, for I shall not write another book, and, in the briefest summary of my childhood, to make no allusion to him would be disloyalty. I almost believe that at one period, had I been set to say who I was, I should have included Rover as an essential part of myself. His tail was my tail; his legs were my legs; his tongue was my tongue!—so much more did I, as we gambolled together, seem conscious of his joy than of my own! Surely, among other and greater mercies, I shall find him again! The next person I see busy about the place, now here now there in the house, and seldom outside it, is Miss Martha Moon. The house is large, built at a time when the family was one of consequence, and there was always much to be done in it. The largest room in it is now called the kitchen, but was doubtless called the hall when first it was built. This was Miss Martha Moon's headquarters.

She was my uncle's second cousin, and as he always called her Martha, so did I, without rebuke: every one else about the place called her Miss Martha.

Of much greater worth and much more genuine refinement than tens of thousands the world calls ladies, she never claimed the distinction. Indeed she strongly objected to it. If you had said or implied she was a lady, she would have shrunk as from a covert reflection on the quality of her work. Had she known certain of such as nowadays call themselves lady-helps, I could have understood her objection. I think, however, it came from a stern adherence to the factness—if I may coin the word—of things. She never called a lie a fib.

When she was angry, she always held her tongue; she feared being unfair. She had indeed a rare power of silence. To this day I do not *know*, but am nevertheless sure that, by an instinct of understanding, she saw into my uncle's trouble, and descried, more or less plainly, the secret of it, while yet she never even alluded to the existence of such a trouble. She had a regard for woman's dignity as profound as silent. She was not of those that prate or rave about their rights, forget their duties, and care only for what they count their victories.

She declared herself dead against marriage. One day, while yet hardly more than a child, I said to her thoughtfully,

"I wonder why you hate gentlemen, Martha!"

"Hate 'em! What on earth makes you say such a wicked thing, Orbie?" she answered. "Hate 'em, the poor dears! I love 'em! What did you ever see to make you think I hated your uncle now?"

"Oh! of course! uncle!" I returned; for my uncle was all the world to me.

"Nobody could hate uncle!"

"She'd be a bad woman, anyhow, that did!" rejoined Martha. "But did anybody ever hate the person that couldn't do without her, Orbie?"

My name—suggested by my uncle because my mother died at my birth—was a curious one; I believe he made it himself. *Belorba* it was, and it means *Fair Orphan*.

"I don't know, Martha," I replied.

"Well, you watch and see!" she returned. "Do you think I would stay here and work from morning to night if I hadn't some reason for it?—Oh, I like work!" she went on; "I don't deny that. I should be miserable if I didn't work. But I'm not bound to this sort of work. I have money of my own, and I'm no beggar for house-room. But rather than leave your uncle, poor man! I would do the work of a ploughman for him."

"Then why don't you marry him, Martha?" I said, with innocent impertinence.

"Marry him! I wouldn't marry him for ten thousand pounds, child!"

"Why not, if you love him so much? I'm sure he wouldn't mind!"

"Marry him!" repeated Miss Martha, and stood looking at me as if here at last was a creature she could *not* understand; "marry the poor dear man, and make him miserable! I could love any man better than that! Just you open your eyes, my dear, and see what goes on about you. Do you see so many men made happy by their wives? I don't say it's all the wives' fault, poor things! But the fact's the same: there's the poor husbands all the time trying hard to bear it! What with the babies, and the headaches, and the rest of it, that's what it comes to—the husbands are not happy! No, no! A woman can do better for a man than marry him!"

"But mayn't it be the husband's fault—sometimes, Martha?"

"It may; but what better is it for that? What better is the wife for knowing it, or how much happier the husband for not knowing it? As soon as you come to weighing who's in fault, and counting how much, it's all up with the marriage. There's no more comfort in life for either of them! Women are sent into the world to make men happy. I was sent to your uncle, and I'm trying to do my duty. It's nothing to me what other women think; I'm here to serve your uncle. What comes of me, I don't care, so long as I do my work, and don't keep him waiting that made me for it. You may think it a small thing to make a man happy! I don't. God thought him worth making, and he wouldn't be if he was miserable. I've seen one woman make ten men unhappy! I know my calling, Orbie. Nothing would make me marry one of them, poor things!"

"But if they all said as you do, Martha?"

"No doubt the world would come to an end, but it would go out singing, not crying. I don't see that would matter. There would be enough to make each other happy in heaven, and the Lord could make more as they were wanted."

"Uncle says it takes God a long time to make a man!" I ventured to remark.

Miss Martha was silent for a moment. She did not see how my remark bore on the matter in hand, but she had such respect for anything my uncle said, that when she did not grasp it she held her peace.

"Anyhow there's no fear of it for the present!" she answered. "You heard the screed of banns last Sunday!"

I thought you would have a better idea of Miss Martha Moon from hearing her talk, than from any talk about her. To hear one talk is better than to see one. But I would not have you think she often spoke at such length. She was in truth a woman of few words, never troubled or troubling with any verbal catarrh. Especially silent she was when any one she loved was in distress. I have seen her stand moveless for moments, with a look that was the incarnation of essential motherhood—as if her eyes were swallowing up sorrow; as if her soul was ready to be the sacrifice for sin. Then she would turn away with a droop of the eye-lids that seemed to say she saw what it was, but saw also how little she could do for it. Oh the depth of the love-trouble in those eyes of hers!

Martha never set herself to teach me anything, but I could not know Martha without learning something of the genuine human heart. I gathered from her by unconscious assimilation. Possibly, a spiritual action analogous to exosmose and endosmose, takes place between certain souls.

CHAPTER III.

MY UNCLE.

Now I must tell you what my uncle was like.

The first thing that struck you about him would have been, how tall and thin he was. The next thing would have been, how he stooped; and the next, how sad he looked. It scarcely seemed that Martha Moon had been able to do much for him. Yet doubtless she had done, and was doing, more than either he or she knew. He had rather a small head on the top of his long body; and when he stood straight up, which was not very often, it seemed so far away, that some one said he took him for Zacchaeus looking down from the sycamore. *I* never thought of analyzing his appearance, never thought of comparing him with any one else. To me he was the best and most beautiful of men—the first man in all the world. Nor did I change my mind about him ever—I only came to want another to think of him as I did.

His features were in fine proportion, though perhaps too delicate. Perhaps they were a little too small to be properly beautiful. When first I saw a likeness of the poet Shelley, I called out "My uncle!" and immediately began to see differences. He wore a small but long moustache, brushed away from his mouth; and over it his eyes looked large. They were of a clear gray, and very gentle. I know from the testimony of others, that I was right in imagining him a really learned man. That small head of his contained more and better than many a larger head of greater note. He was constantly reading—that is, when not thinking, or giving me the lessons which make me now thank him for half my conscious soul.

Reading or writing or thinking, he made me always welcome to share his room with him; but he seldom took me out walking. He was by no means regular in his habits—regarded neither times nor seasons—went and came like a bird. His hour for going out was unknown to himself, was seldom two days together the same. He

would rise up suddenly, even in the middle of a lesson—he always called it "a lesson together"—and without a word walk from the room and the house. I had soon observed that in gloomy weather he went out often, in the sunshine seldom.

The house had a large garden, of a very old-fashioned sort, such a place for the charm of both glory and gloom as I have never seen elsewhere. I have had other eyes opened within me to deeper beauties than I saw in that garden then; my remembrance of it is none the less of an enchanted ground. But my uncle never walked in it. When he walked, it was always out on the moor he went, and what time he would return no one ever knew. His meals were uninteresting to him—no concern to any one but Martha, who never uttered a word of impatience, and seldom a word of anxiety. At whatever hour of the day he went, it was almost always night when he came home, often late night. In the house he much preferred his own room to any other.

This room, not so large as the kitchen-hall, but quite as long, seems to me, when I look back, my earliest surrounding. It was the centre from which my roving fancies issued as from their source, and the end of their journey to which as to their home they returned. It was a curious place. Were you to see first the inside of the house and then the outside, you would find yourself at a loss to conjecture where within it could be situated such a room. It was not, however, contained in what, to a cursory glance, passed for the habitable house, and a stranger would not easily have found the entrance to it.

Both its nature and situation were in keeping with certain peculiarities of my uncle's mental being. He was given to curious inquiries. He would set out to solve now one now another historical point as odd as uninteresting to any but a mind capable of starting such a question. To determine it, he would search book after book, as if it were a live thing, in whose memory must remain, darkly stored, thousands of facts, requiring only to be recollected: amongst them might nestle the thing he sought, and he would dig for it as in a mine that went branching through the hardened dust of ages. I fancy he read any old book whatever of English history with the haunting sense that next moment he might come upon the trace of certain

of his own ancestors of whom he specially desired to enlarge his knowledge. Whether he started any new thing in mathematics I cannot tell, but he would sit absorbed, every day and all day long, for weeks, over his slate, suddenly throw it down, walk out for the rest of the day, and leave his calculus, or whatever it was, for months. He read Shakespeare as with a microscope, propounding and answering the most curious little questions. It seemed to me sometimes, I confess, that he missed a plain point from his eyes being so sharp that they looked through it without seeing it, having focused themselves beyond it.

A specimen of the kind of question he would ask and answer himself, occurs to me as I write, for he put it to me once as we read together.

"Why," he said, "did Margaret, in *Much ado about Nothing*, try to persuade Hero to wear her other rabato?"

And the answer was,

"Because she feared her mistress would find out that she had been wearing it—namely, the night before, when she personated her."

And here I may put down a remark I heard him make in reference to a theory which itself must seem nothing less than idiotic to any one who knows Shakespeare as my uncle knew him. The remark was this—that whoever sought to enhance the fame of lord St. Alban's—he was careful to use the real title—by attributing to him the works of Shakespeare, must either be a man of weak intellect, of great ignorance, or of low moral perception; for he cast on the memory of a man already more to be pitied than any, a weight of obloquy such as it were hard to believe anyone capable of deserving. A being with Shakespeare's love of human nature, and Bacon's insight into essential truth, guilty of the moral and social atrocities into which his lordship's eagerness after money for scientific research betrayed him, would be a monster as grotesque as abominable.

I record the remark the rather that it shows my uncle could look at things in a large way as well as hunt with a knife-edge. At the same time, devoutly as I honour him, I cannot but count him intended for thinkings of larger scope than such as then seemed char-

acteristic of him. I imagine his early history had affected his faculties, and influenced the mode of their working. How indeed could it have been otherwise!