PART I.

"It's no use Sturman, I shall never get it finished—at least, to my liking and Sylvia's. It's five years now since I made the first sketch for it, and there it is, complete in every detail as far as manual skill and technical knowledge can make it, and yet it's not a picture. There's something wanting that only genius can give it. The figures are correct, but they're not alive. There's no sight in their eyes, no movement in their limbs. No, it's not a picture, and I'm not an artist—only a successful illustrator, and that's all there is to be said about it."

"Except that Carlisle's definition of genius would hardly fit your case, for if ever mortal man had an infinite capacity for taking pains you have, March."

"Yes, Sydney would certainly be a genius if Carlyle had been right. I thing the fates have made most aggravating division of the talents between us. They have given him the faculty of re-creation and almost perfect skill in execution, while they have given me the tormenting gift of dreams and de-

"IN WHICH YOU YOURSELF WOULD BE THE BRIGHTEST ANGEL."

nied me utterly the power of reproduction. Now, if, instead of being brother and sister, we could just be rolled into one, either Sydney would be a great artist, or I should be—well, able to write as well as dream, and then I should live in a heaven of my own creation."

"In which you would yourself be the brightest angel!"

The words slipped out almost before John Sturman knew that he had spoken them. His lips had of their own mere motion echoed what he was saying in his soul at the moment. They brought a just perceptably deeper color into Sylvia March's cheeks and a faint flash into the deep gray eyes that were looking at his from under the srtaight, dark, finely-drawn eyebrows. Her brother saved her from the awkwardness of replying to such a speech from a man she has only lately refused, albeit in the friendliest fashion, to marry, by saying:

"That's not at all badly put for you, Sturman, though it seems to sound a bit queer from a man who defines poetry as the pearl of literature because it is the result of disease."

"I'm quite consistent," said Sturman, half smiling and half serious. "What I ought not to have said just now was the result of disease—heart disease."

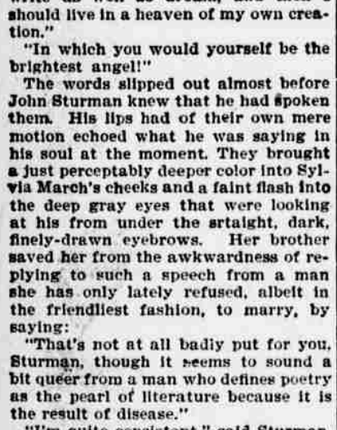
"Now you've made it worse," said Sylvia, gravely.

"What? The disease? That couldn't be worse."

"Suppose we change the subject—or get back to our muttons," said Sylvia, looking more serious than her words. "Now, tell me, have you ever heard a satisfactory definition of this something that Sydney and I seem to want so badly; this mysterious gift of the gods that people call genius without knowing what they are talking about?"

"No, I haven't; and if I did hear one it would probably be so far above my head that I should not understand it."

"That's only your vanity, Sturman," said March. "I think I've told you be-



THIS WAS MARCUS ALGAR.

fore that these aggressive assertions of mediocrity savor somewhat strongly of the pride that apes humility. But, to come to the concrete, I think there's something very like genius in this new book of Marcus Algar's that I'm illustrating. That fellow has a great future before him if his twenty pounds a thousand words doesn't make him greedy and start him off writing himself out, as it has done with one or two others one could name."

"Or if he doesn't get the notion that he has a mission in literature and take to climbing hills," said Sylvia, demurely. "By the way, I suppose you haven't forgotten, Sydney, that the new genius is coming to tea this afternoon to discuss those last sketches of yours."

"No, I haven't forgotten. Don't go Sturman. No, you really mustn't. I particularly want you to meet Algar. Sylvia, tell him to sit down and behave himself. Ah! there he is. "Talk of an angel,' etc."

A ring and well-composed fantasia on the knocker sounded as he spoke, and a few moments later the door of the studio opened. As Sturman rose he saw Sydney go forward with outstretched hand to greet a tall, slightly-built, perfectly-dressed young fellow, fair-haired and dark-eyed, with the complexion of a boy and the face of a woman—at least it would have been a woman's face, he thought, but for a certain strength of brow and chin and two little perpendicular lines between the eyebrows, which would not have quite become a woman.

This was Marcus Algar, le succes de l'heure, as they would have called him in France—the writer, unknown the day before yesterday, whose first book was selling in thousands, despite the fact that it didn't even hint at the Seventh commandment, and hadn't a chapter that either the British matron or the young person could condemn openly with a view to dwelling fondly on it in secret.

The reviewers already called their notices of his work "appreciations," and were almost falling over each other in their haste not to be last or least loud in his praise. Far-seeing editors were competing for his unwritten works, and literary agents were scheming subtly for the honor of standing between him and them.

In a word Marcus Algar was the man of the hour, as other men and women had been of previous hours. The Vagabonds had entertained him and the authors had dined him—and John Sturman knew all this, and if he had had all the wealth of Kimberly he would have given it ceerfully to stand in his shoes, for he did not possess that priceless gift of literary expression, that God-given, unlearnable art, the want of which meant to him the difference between Sylvia's friendship, which had been his for years, and her love, which as she had told him, could be given only to the twin soul for whose advent hers was waiting, the ideal she had not yet met, unless—and as he looked at Marcus Algar and thought of that wonderful book of his, all the evil spirits that lurk behind the rose bushes in the Garden of Love seemed to come out of their hiding-places and take possession of his soul.

He made his excuses and got away as soon as he decently could, because he wasn't the sort of man who could chatter cheerful trivialities when his soul was full of bitterness, and the earth's base seemed subtle and the pillars of the firmament rottenness to him.

He was a strong, straightforward, clean-hearted, clear-headed man, rich, well read and well educated, but with no more romance in his being than was inspired by his almost life-long and now hopeless love for the sister of his old schoolfellow and friend, Sydney March, this girl with the soft chestnut hair and big dreamy gray eyes whom he had worshiped as a boy and loved as a man, in his own plain, honest manly fashion—only to learn as he had learned but a few days before, that that wretched transcendent soul-theory of matrimony of hers was to condemn him to stand by and see her give herself to some one else just because he lacked the one faculty that she placd above all others.

It was maddening to be so near and yet so far, for, with the confidence born of their life-long friendship, she had even told him that she liked him so much "in other ways" that she really would have tried to love him if she could and she had said this so innocently and so sweetly that it had hurt him more than the most scornful refusal could have done, for it did not even leave him the poor consolation of getting angry either with her or with himself.

If Mephistopheles had come to his side just then, as he was walking home from March's studio in Edith Villas, West Kensington, to the big house in Bolton gardens—which he had made so beautiful in the hope that Sylvia would one day reign over it—and offered him that one gift of Marcus Algar's in exchange for everything else on the usual terms, he would have struck the bargain there and then, coute que coute, for Sylvia's sake—and yet, if he had only known it, Mephistopheles was a good deal nearer to his elbow just then than he had any idea of his being.

Altogether his walk home was anything but a pleasant one, for, do what he would, he couldn't keep his thoughts from wandering back to March's studio, and picturing Sylvia and Algar wandering together in that magical Garden of Romance, which he could only look over the fast-closed gate that only the key of Genius could unlock.

PART II.

But when he got home there were two letters waiting for him, which speedily sent the lover into the background, and brought the man of affairs to the front. One was from Brindisi, and the other from Calcutta, but both had come by the same mail. The first was from his younger brother Cecil, who had been for the last three years in the Calcutta branch of the great firm of which John Sturman was the head, to tell him that he was coming home invalided, and the second was from a doctor who had attended Cecil.

There were four large pages of foreign note paper closely covered, and when he got to the end, he turned back and read it over again, and then he put it down and sat for nearly half an hour without moving a muscle, staring straight before him into the fire, and conscious of nothing but a single sentence, which he could not more get out of his brain than he could have helped hearing it if Mephistopheles himself had been whispering it into his ear:

"Perhaps the most extraordinary property of the drug is the unmistakable power that it has of altering either the mental or moral character, and sometimes both, of its victims, and making those under its influence the exact opposite of what they are in a normal state!"

It was a curious and perhaps more than usualy merciless irony of fate that Mephistopheles should come to John Sturman in the guise of his younger brother, and yet such was literally the case. The plain facts, as represented in the doctor's letter, were that Cecil had become a victim to the haschisch habit, and as soon as he had discovered this he had sent him straight home, knowing as he did that if he was to have a chance of rescue he must be almost constantly under the eye of some one for whom he had both affection and respect.

He had himself suggested his elder brother, the only near relation he had left, as soon as the matter had been put plainly before him, and he had been told that his one chance of life and sanity depended on his placing himself unreservedly in the hands of some one who could bring a strong, healthy mind and an unimpaired will to the task of supervising the gradual diminution of doses which, as it were, marked the milestones along the only possible road to a cure.

The doctor's letter had consisted for the most part of precise instructions as to the course of treatment to be pursued, and if it had not been for that one fatal sentence which had set John Sturman thinking so hard the afternoon he read it, all might have been well.

But there it was, and the work that it had begun was rapidly completed by the inevitable conversations which he had with Cecil on the haschisch and its works. He kept the drug safely in his own care, measuring out the doses with scrupulous exactness, and noting with a fatally growing interest their effects on his patient.

Cecil would come down to breakfast dull and languid and headachy. He would take his three doses—each one ever so little smaller than the previous one—at ten, two, and six. At lunch he would be well and cheerful, and at dinner and all through the evening brilliant in thought and expression, and he would live two lives, his own and then they would sit over the fire in their library and smoke, and Cecil would tell him of his visions, and weave stories splendid with all the gorgeous imagery of eastern life, and then when Cecil had gone to bed he would sit on alone and think, and, unconsciously to himself, and before an atom of the drug had passed his lips, the subtle poison worked, and at last the struggle ended, and he yielded, almost before he knew that it had begun in deadly earnest.

He had been to tea that afternoon at the studio, and, though nothing direct or positive had been said, he had intuitively felt that Sylvia was fast coming to the belief that in Marcus Algar she had at last met the twin-soul, the incarnate ideal for which hers had been waiting, and, from a remark or two dropped, perhaps purposely and with the kindliest intention, by Sydney, that the young genius seemed also to have found his own ideal in Sylvia.

Nay, he had even at the last minute put back the publication of his new book, and, with a few deft and masterly touches, had recreated his heroine in the living likeness of Sylvia, and in a few days more all the world would be at her feet, drawn there by the master-hand which had painted this other-self of hers so perfectly that henceforth she would live two lives, er own and the greater and brighter one that Algar's genius had given her.

It was this that had brought his struggle to an end. His rival, as he perforce regarded him, had drawn the magic circle of his genius round his darling, and so, in a sense, had already made her his own. What did it matter then to him, what became of the life that was henceforth to be a desert for him?

The enchantment of his hopeless love, turned all the strength of nature which should have saved him against him;

IF MEPHISTOPHELES HIMSELF HAD BEEN WHISPERING IN HIS EAR.

and where a weaker man might have resisted through fear, he took the fatal step, impelled by his own perverted strength.

The night after Cecil had gone to bed, he went to his cabinet, and took what was, for a beginner, a heavy dose of haschisch. Then he locked the door and sat down in his easy chair by the fire, to await results.

Soon a delightful languor began to steal over his physical senses. He closed hi eyes and his mind seemed to become detached from his body. A great unearthly light shown into the darkness of the despair which had been clouding all his life, and, as the darkness vanished, the chains that had bound his intellect down to the commonplace, were loosened, and it rose at a leap into the long-forbidden, glowing realms of romance.

Then his eyes opened, and he saw a strange vision. One of those dream-stories of Sylvia's, which she had told to him in her halting, imperfect way, and which she would almost have given her life to be able to set forth in worthy language, came to him, brilliant and vivid, instinct with the poetry of the most exquisite realism. The charcters sprang into incarnate being before him, with such life-likeness, that he seemed to see and recognize them as though thy had been old acquaintances, as they moved and spoke amidst the scenes that Sylvia had imagined for them without being able to reproduce them; and all was so real and vivid and beautiful that it seemed as though he were actually living in that vision-world which she would have painted if she could.

Why should he not paint it for her since he saw it so plainly before him? There was his writing-table and his chair ready for him. In his early clerking days he had learned shorthand as a convenience, and he had kept it up since as a hobby, and, however swiftly the glowing sentences might come to him, his pencil would keep pace with them.

He made an effort to rise from his chair and go to his table, but, before he reached it, it seemed to him that he was already there. It was curious, but he put it down to the effects of the drug, and caught himself wondering what was going to happen next. He saw himself sitting in the chair, and he went and looked over his own shoulder and saw the pencil already flying over the paper. Sheet after sheet he read as it was finishd and threw aside, and hour after hour he stood there reading and wondering what it all meant, until at last it was finished, and his other self got up and looked at him.

He saw now that his face was ashen gray and deep scored with the lines drawn by intense mental effort. Beads of sweat were standing out thickly on his brow, and his eyes were burning with a fierce light that might have been either insanity or genius.

Then he saw his lips move into a faint and almost ghastly smile, and heard his own voice to say to him, as though speaking from a distance:

"Well, that's a good night's work, and I think it's about time to go to bed. Good-night!"

Then his two-beings seemed to fuse together again and become one. He lit his hand-lamp as usual, turned the gas out and went to bed, and scarcely was his head on the pillow than he fell into a deep, heavy, dreamless sleep.

When he awoke the next morning all that remained to him of his experiment

HE WENT AND LOOKED OVER HIS OWN SHOULDERS.

in visions was a slight tightness across his forehead and a dim recollection of having dreamed a very wonderful dream. That the dream was a reality never occurred to him for a moment.

He got up half an hour later than usual, feeling a trifle repentant and perhaps just a little ashamed of himself, but thinking that, after all, he had got pretty cheaply out of what seemed to him now to be the greatest danger of his life.

He had breakfast with Cecil, as usual, and then went to the library. He found the door locked, a circumstance which struck him as being rather strange, and mechanically put his hand into his pocket for the key. It was there, and he opened the door and went in. On the threshold he stopped and started slightly, and then he looked round to see if anyone had seen him come into the room.

Then he went in and locked the door again behind him. His writing-table and the floor beside it were littered with sheets of paper.

PART III.

He crossed the room and picked one of them up with a hand that was not very steady and began to read it. There could be no doubt as to what it was. It was a fragment of one of Sylvia's dream-stories written by a master hand. He read the page through, and then picked up some more at random, and went and sat down in his armchair by the ashes of last night's fire, and read page after page, disconnected as they were, and yet most evidently parts of one beautiful whole.

Then he laid them on the floor beside him and strove to collect his thoughts so that he might read the riddle, and bit by bit the remembered fragments of his vision came together and took shape, and then the truth dawned upon him.

What the Calcutta doctor had said about the drug was true. Under its influence he had been the exact reverse of his normal mental self, and the net result of his experiment, as far as he could see, had been the division of his being into two separate entities, one of which was still the sober, practical, commonplace man of affairs, and the other the dreamer of gorgeous dreams, the genius dowered with the supreme gift of literary expression in its highest form and most perfect capacity—and yet for all that an unreality, a specter that came out of the darkness of a drug-induced slumber to work its wondrous spells and then vanish back into the snadows.

Only too clearly did he see this, for the more he read of his own work the more horribly apparent became the truth that, not to save his soul alive, could he in his natural self put two of those glowing, perfectly worded sentences together.

He got up and collected the sheets, and put them in order, and then read the story through from beginning to end. He had learned enough of the art by reading to see that it was a literary gem, enough even of itself to found a reputation upon, and this was his work—or at least the work of that other self of his which the potent magic of the drug had called into being.

And if it had done this once why should it not do it many times? Here was Sylvia's own story glorified into a splendid reality and by him! Was not this a proof that this other self of his was in truth that twin soul which hers had, by her own confession, been waiting to meet and mate with?

He folded up the sheets and put them into his pocket. At 11 his brougham came as usual to the door, and he took them to the city and gave them to his confidential clerk to transcribe on his typewriter. That evenig he paid a visit to the studio, and asked Sylvia to read his first essay in fiction.

Not quite a year had passed since John Sturman had made his first experiment in visions, and during those swiftly passing months he had lived on earth and in heaven, and not infrequently he had descended into the nethermost hell of human suffering. He had carried on his business affairs as of second nature, yet with an ever lessening interest in them.

That specter genius of his had won him fame with all its intoxicating accompaniments, and he had no cause to envy Marcus Algar now, either in his new art or his old love, for his own fame was fresher and brighter than his, and Sylvia, all innocent of its terrible origin, had welcomed the awakening of his long-dormant genius as a heaven-sent revelation; and so his latest wooing had not been in vain.

Sydney's picture, finished at last under his inspiration, was hanging on the line at Burlington house, the wonder and admiration of the thousands who had read the marvelous romance which he had woven around it, and for him the whole

HIS LATEST WOOING HAD NOT BEEN IN VAIN.

earth had been transfigured—until one of those inevitable hours came when he stood alone with his own reproachful and accusing soul on the edge of the deep, black unbridgeable gulf at which the flower-strewn path of his love and fame must some day infallibly end, for that spectral other self of his had to be fed every day with ever-increasing doses of the poison which ere long must slay both it and him—and then what of Sylvia?

They were to be married in a month, and meanwhile he was finishing the novel for which all the world was waiting. What was to happen? Would the remnant of his manhood and self-control compel him to save his darling from himself while yet there was time, or would he take her hand irrevocably in his and lead her for awhile along that enchanted path, knowing as he did what the end of the brief journey must be?

What his own answer to the inexorable question might have been there is no telling, neither is there any need to guess at it, for the fates themselves answered it in their own way.

One night he sat down to write the last pages of his book. For awhile the ideas came bright and thronging as ever, wedding themselves in harmonious union of sound sense with words which flowed so easily from his pen. Then, just on the threshold of the last scene, his pen stopped. The splendid vision whose realization was to have been the crowning glory of his work grew dim and blurred and dull as the night-clouds from which the glory of the sunset has faded away. He stared about him, dazed and wondering like a man suddenly awakened from a dream. Then he turned back and read the pages he had just written, and could not even recognize his own work. He saw that it was beautiful, but it was utterly strange to him. Who had written it, and how did it come there on his table with the ink scarcely dry on the paper? He had forgotten.

Then his eye fell upon a few little greenish-brown lozenges lying at his elbow. A swift gleam of remembrance falling on his mind like a lightning flash through sudden night. Behind him lay the path of his brief, dear-bought glory, strewn with flowers that now were withered, and before him the gulf, and beyond that a black infinity.

He gathered up the lozenges and swallowed them all at a gulp. Soon the fast-fading fires leapt up into a blaze of light, wild, lurid and dazzling. Visions of chaotic splendor chased each other in headlong haste through the death-dance of his expiring senses. He had a dim consciousness of seizing his pen and driving it over the paper as though he were writing for his very life and more. Then, like the falling of a black pall before his eyes, came darkness darker than night, and he felt himself falling, bound and blinded, into immeasurable depths, through an eternity compressed into moments, and moments stretched out into eternities.

When Cecil, now cured and hale and sane, came and found him in the morning, he was dead. The writing table was strewn with pages filled with the most piteous nosense, and under the hand,

HE FELT HIMSELF FALLING, BOUND AND BLINDED, INTO IMMEASURABLE DEPTHS,

which still held his pen was the last page of all, half covered with an unintelligible line, which was the most eloquent of all the lines his pen had ever traced.

The End.