

# The Way of Silence

*By* GILBERT FRANKAU

ILLUSTRATED BY C. J. McCARTHY

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# The Way of Silence

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## I.

Sir Heron Baynet, best nerve specialist in Harley Street, eyed his patient across the consulting-room desk and asked: "You've told me everything?"

The young man—he looked twenty-five but might have been thirty—hesitated. The blue eyes under the high forehead held steadily to the lined face of the specialist; the smooth cheeks did not twitch; nor was there any neurasthenic droop to the clean-shaven mouth. An athlete, Sir Heron judged—one of those long-limbed, large-handed, deep-voiced, slow-moving Englishmen whose very reticence makes them such difficult subjects for the psycho-therapist. He repeated his question: "You've told me everything, Mr. Margerson?"

*"He was funny—little old man in a dressing-gown, with his hour-glass, and his Macaw."*



“Everything? Yes, I think so.” Margerson spoke slowly. “I suppose it’s only natural that a man should be a bit”—he fumbled for his word—“abnormal after crashing from fifteen thousand. Shook up my brains, I expect. Not that they were anything to write home about before the accident.”

“But you told me the accident, the crash from your ’plane, took place three years ago,” persisted the consultant. “And you’ve only noticed this—er—peculiarity during the last six weeks.”

“It may have been coming on for longer than that. I’m afraid I’m not much good at describing my own symptoms.”

“And you say you really are a rich man?”

“Rich!” Margerson laughed. “Why, I’m quite decently wealthy. My father left me a million and a half in securities, besides the family business.”

“You sold the business?”

“Yes. For another half-million.”

“H’m.” Heron Baynet picked a card from the mahogany index, a fountain-pen from the silver rack. “H’m.” He began to write. “Margerson, Eric. Twenty-eight. Unmarried.” Followed details of blood-pressure, pulse, eyesight, knee-jerk, and a note—“physique magnificent”; then, “Specific delusion—poverty. Incipient insomnia. Admits occasional suicidal impulses. Query—if concealing family history?”

Meanwhile Eric Margerson, watching the movements of the fountain-pen, knew that he had made a fool of himself; knew that all doctors, and more especially doctors who pretended to cure a man of “nerves,” were professional highwaymen, robbers of the rich. Eric Margerson said to himself: “There’s nothing the matter with me. And even if there were, this old idiot couldn’t help.”

“The old idiot,” looking up from his card, said almost the same thing. “I’m afraid I can’t be of much use to you, Mr. Margerson,” said “the old idiot.” “If you take my advice, you’ll try and find some interesting work. Idleness in a case such as yours only encourages the mind to neglect its function, which is control. Try to control those delusions, Mr. Margerson. By the way, you’re not contemplating matrimony?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“For various reasons.” The specialist took the eye-glasses off his nose, polished them on the sleeve of his coat. “You see, impulses such as you have

described are sometimes transmitted from father to son. And in case you *were* contemplating matrimony, it would be very interesting——”

A flicker of annoyance showed in the patient’s eyes. Rising, he said: “I’m sorry to have troubled you, doctor.”

“Not at all.” Through the eye-glasses, replaced on nose. Sir Heron Baynet scrutinized his man. “I regret not to have been of more assistance.” And, seeing the youngster take out his pocket-book, Sir Heron added: “Thank you. That will be five guineas.”

Counting the five notes from his case, the two half-crowns from his trouser-pocket, Eric Margerson was aware of the horror, of the Thing which had driven him to Harley Street. The Thing had followed him; perched—scarlet-pinioned and malignant—on the Japanese screen in the far corner of the consulting-room. The Thing cackled to see the five notes spread on the desk, the two heavy coins atop of the notes. The Thing cackled: “Sand in an hourglass. It pours away. You can’t atop it pouring.”

## II.

**T**he horror, contrary to custom, followed Eric Margerson down Harley Street. He could almost hear its twisted feet scratching along the pavement. But he refused to let the Thing hurry him. That way, he knew, lay panic.

Sun, emerging sulkily from wet clouds, shone on him strolling; shone on the mud-splashed pavement, on his patent-leather boots, on the gold ring of his umbrella. But no sun shone on the Thing behind, on the intangible horror which drove him, and drove—across Cavendish Square, through Vere Street, over Regent Street, into Bond Street, down Bond Street.

He would have liked to loiter, shopping in Bond Street. His man had mentioned the need of shirts, of silk socks. He would have to order a supply of cartridges before the shooting-season began. When he stopped outside his gunsmith’s, the horror came quite close—whispering.

“Not yet!” whispered the horror. “Sand in an hourglass. Wait till it pours away. Then——”

Eric Margerson stood for a long time peering at the weapons behind the plate glass. The smooth, brown barrels of the twelve-bores fascinated him. He wanted to enter the shop, to handle them. But more than the twelve-bores, he wanted to handle the black grips, the black barrels of the pistols. Why shouldn’t he buy one of those pistols—the long, single-chambered

pistol in the polished-wood case? That one would be best—because there were twenty-five cartridges. . . . “Not yet!” whispered the Thing.

Eric Margerson continued his stroll—and the horror continued to follow. But the scratching feet lagged on the pavement. The scratching feet were afraid. The Thing with the scratching feet knew that if Margerson strolled left-handed out of Bond Street, it would not dare accompany him.

**T**he man in the blue suit, the patent-leather boots, and the bowler hat, who turned into Burlington Gardens and made for the West End Branch of the Bank of England, was a perfectly ordinary, long-limbed denizen of Mayfair—so far removed from those horrors which beset the unconscious mind that, looking back, he could no longer visualize the Thing with the scratching feet, could scarcely remember Sir Heron Baynet’s question about matrimony, the statement which had followed the question.

Yet one word of that statement, the word “transmitted,” flickered in the subconscious dark of Margerson’s personality as he entered the Bank; remained with him while he talked with the clerk; refused to be entirely exorcised even by the counting over of a hundred pounds in notes, the stuffing of them into his pocket-book.

“If you’ll excuse my mentioning it, sir,” said the clerk, “your balance is rather higher than usual. Nearly five thousand. Hadn’t we better put a thousand or two on deposit?”

“Thanks—but I don’t like letting myself get too low,” answered Margerson, and strolled out again into the sunshine. “Transmitted,” he thought, “transmitted. I wonder whether I ought to have told the old idiot?”

### III.

**M**y Dear, you know I haven’t been to a dance since——” Nesta Thring gazed wide-eyed across the shadowy studio.

It was always cold in the studio, even at high noon of a midsummer’s day; and always towards tea-time the shadows began to gather. They gathered round Nesta—round the grey-eyed, high-foreheaded girl with the sleek, brown hair and the slim, expressive fingers.

“It wasn’t your fault, and you’ve no right to spoil your life.” Eileen Appleby—forthright and buxom, gold hair looped round heavy-lobed ears—tapped impatient shoe on the stained floor. “You’ve simply got to take hold of yourself, Nes. Besides, this man Margerson’s a millionaire.”

"I loathe people with money," said Nesta Thring. Her voice was low and controlled—too controlled. As though she dreaded lest speech should betray her thoughts!

"That's sheer pose, Nes. People with money are no worse than people without. As a matter of fact, they're usually better. It's terribly difficult to be really nice when one's poor." Eileen adjusted her hat at the painting mirror. "Say you'll come, Nes. To oblige me. I can't very well go by myself."

"Why not? This isn't the eighteen-eighties." The shadows were gathering close; Eileen gone, she—Nesta—would be engulfed in them. Eileen moved to the door.

"Don't be a pig, Nes. It isn't often I ask favours."

"But I haven't got a frock."

"Rubbish. You've got at least six."

"Out of fashion!"

"Fashion be damned, my dear. I'll fetch you at eight," said Eileen Appleby, and bolted to her own studio.

#### IV.

Margerson, as he dressed for dinner that evening, knew himself nearing the end. His fingers shook as he adjusted his white tie. His eyes, staring back at him from the mirror, seemed the eyes of a dead man—of the man he had found beside the hourglass.

Every light in the luxurious flat was ablaze; he could hear his valet, busy with hat-brush and pad, in the adjoining room. But neither lights nor valet could keep the Thing much longer at bay. Even the pocket-book—and there were three hundred pound notes in the gold-monogrammed pocket-book on the dressing-table—would soon lose its power.

"Get me a sherry-and-bitters, please, Wainwright," called Eric Margerson. "The brown sherry."

"Certainly, sir."

"Is the car ready?"

"Yes, sir."

Drinking the sherry (drink had lost its bite long since, but the habit endured); suffering himself to be helped into his dress-coat, his overcoat;

taking hat and stick from the impassive Wainwright, Eric Margerson managed sufficient self-control to visualize the past.

It was early November—four months since he had visited the “old idiot” in Harley Street—four months since he had not told that which must never be told to a living soul—the secret of the dead beside the hourglass—the secret of the Thing.

The “old idiot” had spoken of work. As if work could exorcise the scarlet-winged horror. Only dissipation, mad nights with girls and wine and music, such a night as the present, could lull the Thing with the scratching feet, the Thing whose cackled “Poverty!” drove him to a passion of reckless spending.

## V.

**I**f you and I had a tenth of that fellow’s income,” said half-a-dozen well-groomed young men to half-a-dozen *décolletée* young women, “we certainly could enjoy life.”

All eyes at Ciro’s Club were fixed on Margerson’s party as they made their way among the diners to the long table at the far end of the room. It was a biggish party—sixteen in all; and the long table had been lavishly prepared for it. Flowers banked red and yellow above the oysters and the cocktail glasses. The *maitre d’hôtel* stood expectant. Magnums of the best were already cooling in their ice-buckets.

Nesta Thring was glad of the buzz which greeted their entrance, glad of the lavishness, glad—above all—for the sudden yellow out-blaze of light in the roof as they sat down. Here were no shadows, only forgetfulness. She had been a fool to hide herself so long. . . .

Except for a tell-tale line or so under her eyes, the girl looked almost her young self. To Margerson, sitting between her and Eileen Appleby, she seemed positively radiant. He forgot the remainder of his guests—almost forgot himself—in admiration of the dimpled shoulders peeping from the gold frock, of the smooth hair, the rounded arms, and expressive fingers. He whispered to Eileen: “I didn’t quite catch your friend’s name”; heard it, began an aimless conversation.

She answered his questions cautiously; seemed averse from chatter. He judged her rather a sober-sides; liked her none the less for that.

The meal progressed. Talk grew louder about them. Music sprayed the room. Wine circulated, bubbling. Coffee came, and liqueurs. Tobacco



fumed. They were clearing the centre table from the floor. Music blared. Dancing-time began.

“Shall we?” asked Margerson, laying his half-smoked cigar on the coffee-saucer.

“Not yet. If you don’t mind. I’d so much rather watch the first one.”

Nesta’s voice was still low, controlled. The wine had not moved her. Cigarette between parted lips, she eyed the dancers. They, the dancers, brought things back to one. Was it fair, was it fair to the dead, that she should have come? Pain crept up behind the widening pupils of her grey eyes.

**T**hey were alone at the table now, silent. And suddenly Margerson grew aware of the Thing.

Never before had the Thing dared itself in such surroundings. Always, while he danced, it waited for him at home. Then why, to-night of all nights, should he hear the scratching feet through the slither of the dancers?

The scratching feet slithered near and nearer, till he knew the horror perching—scarlet-pinioned and malignant—close to the dimpled shoulders of the girl at his side. The Thing was counting the cost of the dinner he had given. “Eighty pounds,” cackled the Thing. “Sand in an hourglass.” Margerson shivered, signalled the *maitre d’hôtel*, drew a hundred-pound note from his pocket-book, and said: “Don’t bother about bringing the bill.” Then he returned to Nesta.

“I insist on your dancing with me, Miss Thring.” Couldn’t she see the horror—the horror at her left shoulder?

“I—I really don’t want to, Mr. Margerson.” Didn’t he know, surely everyone in London knew, why it wouldn’t be decent of her to dance? “I wonder—I wonder if you’d think it awfully rude of me if I went home?”

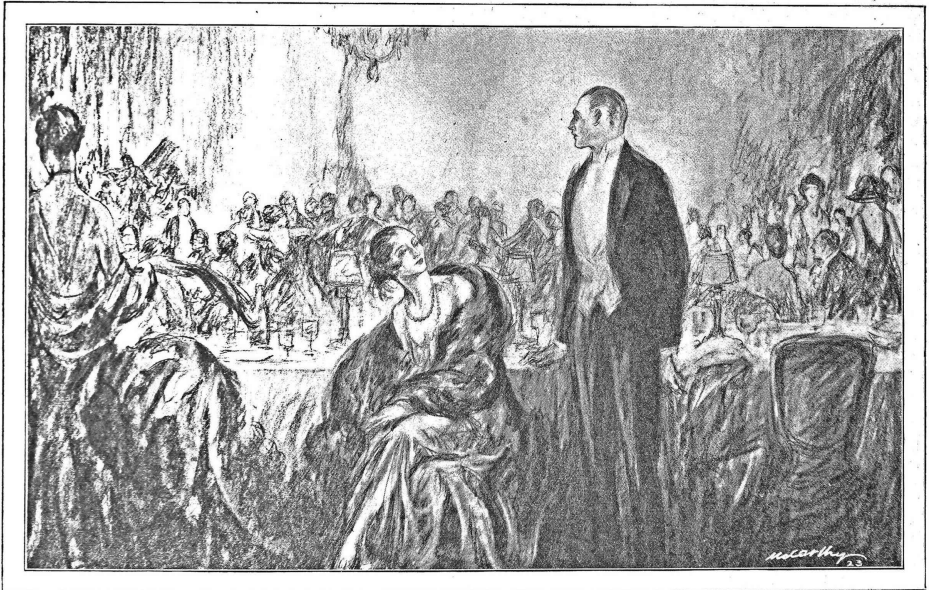
“She *can* see it,” thought Margerson. “That’s why she won’t dance with me. That’s why she wants to go home.” Aloud he said, sullenly: “I’ve stuck it for three years. You ought to be able to put up with it for one evening.”

The *maitre d’hôtel* came back with his change—twenty pounds. He waved the man away. Why didn’t the girl say something? Why did she stare and stare at him? He almost screamed at her: “It isn’t my fault if you see it. I didn’t make the Thing. It was made for me.”

“Don’t!” The control in Nesta’s voice snapped as dry twigs across a man’s knee. “Don’t talk about *him*. I thought he’d stop in the studio. I oughtn’t to have come. Let me go back. Get me a taxi, and let me go back.”

He caught at her bare arm as she rose. “Don’t go. Let *me* go. He—God knows why you call the thing ‘he’—won’t stop if I don’t.”

She gazed down, affrighted, into his blue eyes; saw them crazy as she felt her own. “I don’t know what you mean, unless you, too——”



*Margerson sprang to his feet. In his distraught brain the dancing-place was a blazing cage of scarlet wings.*

Margerson sprang to his feet. In his distraught brain the dancing-place was a blazing cage of scarlet wings. He could hear the Thing screaming at him, see its beak already gouging at the grey eyes of the girl. “Let’s get away!” he shouted at her—“let’s get away from it!”

Syncopated jazz-time drowned the shout of Margerson’s voice; dancing heads scarcely noticed the pair as they fled across the parquet.

## VI.

Margerson’s mind held only vaguest recollections of their flight from *Ciro’s*. He knew that Nesta had left him for a moment to get her cloak, that he had cursed at not finding his car, that she had given

some address to the taxi-driver. All else—even the horror—was a blank behind driving rain.

The rain drove and drove, lashing at the windows of their vehicle, blurring the street-lamps to kaleidoscopic spangles of orange and silver. The girl had averted herself. He did not dare speak to her. The hands on her lap were clenched about the white gloves. The feet in the gold shoes arched with tension. She was all tension—wires drawn to breaking-point. He touched her arm; felt the muscles flexed, hard as stone. The rain drove and drove at them. They drove, rigid as statues, through the driving rain.

Their taxi stopped, and she made a movement to get out. He said: “Wait a moment; I’d better pay him,” fumbled for money, half-expecting that she would protest.

But Nesta Thring was beyond protestations. Across that rain-beaten courtyard, down that half-lit passage, in the bare studio at end of the passage, waited the shadows. To-night she no longer dared face the shadows alone.

Margerson, following her at a run, felt the rain on his face, felt glad for the coolth of the rain.

A lamp burned in the fan-light above the studio door. In the beam of the light the girl’s grey eyes showed like the eyes of a sleepwalker. She found her key, let them in. Margerson saw that every electric in the studio was ablaze. And when, leaving him for a moment, she passed through a door at the end of the studio, he saw that—there, too—shone unshaded electrics.

He took off his sopped hat, his wet overcoat; laid them on a divan. Anthracite burned in the big stove. Heavy curtains had been drawn across the high north windows. It was warm in the studio, unpleasantly warm, he thought, and desolate! Canvases turned to the walls—empty easels—dusty draperies, as though the ghost of a dead painter had forbidden the living to work.

But at least the horror had not followed them through the rain. The horror must have returned to his own flat—to the other place where a soul in darkness tried to stave off darkness with a blaze of lamps.

**H**e said to the girl when she came back to him: “Do you keep them burning night and day?”

“No.” The lines under the grey eyes showed as a fine network of pain; the lips hardly moved to their syllables. “No. I tried that. But it didn’t do any

good. And I was ashamed——”

“You mean, when friends came to see you.”

“Yes.”

“But you sleep with them on?”

“Of course. You, too?”

Margerson nodded assent.

“Hadn’t you better smoke?” said the girl. “That usually does good. There’s a box of cigarettes somewhere or other. I’ll find them.”

She moved about the room aimlessly, making curious detours from one piece of furniture to the other.

“Why do you do that?” asked Margerson irritably.

“What?”

“Zig-zag about.”

“I’m afraid of running into *him*,” said the girl. “And I can’t find any cigarettes. You’ll have to smoke your own.”

She detoured her way back to the stove; accepted a cigarette from his case. His fingers shook as he held the match for her. They faced one another, upright, silent—two souls in Hell. At last the man spoke:

“You’ve tried the doctors, I suppose?”



*"Everyone knows about Nesta Thring. You know of course. That's why you came in with me."*

"Only one. And he wanted to know too much. I—I hated him for pretending not to know, for trying to make me tell him. You see, he must have known *really*. Everybody knows about Nesta Thring. You know of course. That's why you came in with me."

"I don't." Margerson's voice was steady. For the moment his mind controlled itself. "I don't. Honour bright, I haven't got the faintest idea."

She came closer. Her eyes peered up at him. "You swear that. . . . On your honour. Then I'll tell you. It may help. The doctor said it would help. But he was only pretending not to know—Give me another cigarette."

He gave her the cigarette, and she began to speak, half to herself, half to him.

“I’m Nesta Thring. Everybody except—I’ve forgotten your name—but everybody except you knows about Nesta Thring. She was going to be married. I mustn’t tell you his name. That wouldn’t be fair. But he was a painter and he wanted to marry Nesta. And Nesta Thring promised. That was the beastly part of it; she promised. The coroner made her admit——”

“The coroner?” Margerson’s face twitched.

“Of course? There had to be a coroner. You see, when Nesta Thring broke her promise, when she told him that she couldn’t marry a poor man, he”—Margerson, bending down, only just caught the low words—“he killed himself. Poor Nesta! It wasn’t her fault. She never thought when she told him. And she’s paid for it. A hundred times over she’s paid for it. *He* made her pay for it. Every night *he* sits and watches her. And to-night——” The voice broke in her throat; she put out a hand to him, and he caught at it, as a man drowning might catch at a thrown rope.

“Go on!” he prompted. “What happened to-night?”

“He followed me out. He was in the courtyard when Eileen came to fetch me. Eileen couldn’t see him. I thought he’d gone back to the studio. But he hadn’t. He followed me. You saw him at the dance.” Her fingers clutched. “You *did* see him?”

And suddenly Margerson laughed, a high-pitched, quavering laugh, a madman’s laugh.

“Him? Him? Of course I didn’t see him. Why should I? I saw the parrot. It was trying to scratch your eyes out. That’s why I took you away.”

“The parrot?” Now fear had its way with Nesta Thring. Her legs shook under the gold frock. And yet, this was a different fear. Physical! Almost a relief after the shadowy apprehensions of the mind!

“Yes. The parrot. The poor old governor’s parrot. It wasn’t really a parrot. It was a macaw. Scarlet! Its wings were all scarlet, and its feet scratched. He said in his letter that I ought to sell the parrot. That it was worth thirty shillings.”

“Who said?” Somehow the haze of many months had cleared from Nesta’s mind. She knew herself still afraid, yet with a pleasant fear. Physical! Intelligible! Fear of the man whose laugh still rang in her ears.

“The governor, of course.”

“Your father?”

“Yes.” Margerson began laughing again. “Would you like to hear about him? It’s a lovely story. I’ve never told it to anyone before. But you’re haunted, too. So it doesn’t matter. And besides”—his voice dropped, grew cunning—“*we* didn’t have a coroner. Nobody knows anything, except myself and the parrot. I thought I’d killed the parrot. But it won’t die. They never do—when they’ve got scarlet wings.”

He gripped her hand, and the grip hurt. But Nesta did not cry out. Better the grip of a maniac’s hand, the sound of a maniac’s voice, than solitude among the shadows.

She wondered, as he began to speak, what could have happened to the shadows. There were no shadows in the studio, only a blaze of raw light under which she, Nesta Thring, stood gripped by a madman.

“You’re a pretty woman,” said the madman. “Too pretty to kill yourself. But, of course, you will kill yourself. We all do—in the end. My governor did. Mad as a hatter, of course. Poor old governor. He thought he was ruined. That was *his* horror—Money. I’ve seen him running up and down the office, swearing we were going bankrupt, swearing the clerks were stealing the postage stamps. Funny! Because he left a couple of millions—when he killed himself. I suppose it was my fault in a way. I used to laugh at him. You couldn’t help laughing, especially about the clock. I haven’t told you about the clock——”

He stopped for a moment; and it came to Nesta—how, she did not know—that his voice altered; became the voice of an old man.

“If only I weren’t so tired, I could tell you a lot about the clock. It stood in the governor’s bedroom. A grandfather clock. Tick! Tick! Tick! You know the kind. He said the ticking prevented his going to sleep. Silly old governor, as if anyone ever did go to sleep. You and I don’t, do we? So we moved it into the study, where the parrot was.”

The grip on Nesta’s fingers relaxed.

“But he took a dislike to it. He said he wouldn’t live with any damn’ clock. Clocks made too much noise. He wanted an hourglass. So we bought him one. . . . He’d given up the business by then. I made him. You see, he didn’t want to pay the wages. You’ve no idea what a fight I had about the wages—every week—every single week, till he gave it up. I *was* glad when he gave it up. . . . And then, of course, he killed himself.”

In the raw glare Margerson's blue eyes showed as the eyes of a sleepwalker, as Nesta's eyes had shown.

"You're rather like what I remember of my mother. You're much too pretty to kill yourself. I shouldn't if I were you. It's only when you don't tell people that it's so bad. The old idiot in Harley Street knew that. *I* told him it came from the crash. It didn't, of course. The crash only re-started it. One loses control, you know. I kept it under for years—till the crash. But I can't keep it under control any more. That's why I'm telling you. I used to go and see him every evening, after office hours.

"He *was* funny—little old man in a dressing-gown, with his hourglass, and his macaw, and his 'Well, Eric; made any money to-day, Eric? Can you lend your father any money to-day, Eric?' But the last time I went, he didn't say anything at all. He was dead, you see. Dead as a doornail. And the sand had run out of the hourglass; and the parrot had got out of its cage. There was a letter, of course, to say why he'd done it. 'No more money. Not a bob in the house.' That's what he wrote. *You'll* write a letter when you do it. One simply has to write a letter. I've written three already. You'll burn them for me, won't you?"

The man's voice was failing. He staggered where he stood, and Nesta—understanding a little—helped him towards the divan.

"I burnt his—or they'd have brought it in suicide. And after the inquest I killed the parrot. Poor old parrot! But it had to be killed. It knew too much. 'Eric,' it used to cackle, 'Eric, made any money, Eric?' So I wrung its neck." Words died to a whisper. "If only—their feet—wouldn't—scratch—after you wring their necks——"

Margerson sank down on to the divan: and Nesta, bending over him, heard a boy's voice issue from the half-closed lips. "Is that you, mater?" said the boy's voice. "Nice of you to come in and say good-night. I'm most awfully sleepy. Give me a kiss before I go to sleep."

## VII.

Eileen Appleby, returning anxious from Ciro's, saw Nesta Thring's door ajar, crept in. No lights burned in the studio; but a crimson glow from the anthracite stove revealed Margerson, full length on the divan, a purple cushion under his head. And by Margerson's side, watchful in a deep chair, sat Nesta.

"He's asleep," whispered Nesta. "You mustn't turn the lights on. You mustn't wake him."



“But, my dear——”

“Hush! You don’t know. Pray God that you never will know. He’s been down into the valley of the shadow. But I’m going to save him, Eileen. And I’m going to save myself. Don’t you understand? If he’s saved, I’m saved too. A life for a life.”

But neither then nor thereafter did Eileen Appleby understand. To Eileen Appleby and the friends of Eileen Appleby it always seems that “Nesta was damned lucky to marry a millionaire—especially after that other business.”

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *The Way of Silence* by Gilbert Frankau]