42“You shouldn't allow yourself to get so down my dear”, she said as he handed her the cup. He allowed a brief smile to flicker across his face. He always admired his wife's ability to sense his emotion.

He watched her gaze into space as she held the cup in her lap. “It's nice tea, thank you dear,” She said, now moving her head. “It feels warm today,” she remarked, “it must be a nice day outside.

“It is,” he replied gazing out of the window, “there's not a cloud in the sky.”

“Would you open the window for me please darling?” He opened the heavy sash with a grunt. “Thank you dear. It's wonderful. It's like everything suddenly came to life. I can feel the fresh breeze carrying all the smells of summer, and of course, the sea.” He smiled as her face lit up. “I always imagine I can see the sea when I hear gulls crying like that.”

“Can you hear the skylark too?” He asked excitedly.

“Yes,” she smiled, “in that, at least, we're equals. I don't believe either of us will ever be lucky enough to see a skylark soaring.” He touched her face gently.

“I'm glad the accident didn't take your humour my love. I don't know where we'd be without that.”

“How many times must I tell you Richard? You mustn't be like that. There's always a reason to go on. Even after that damned accident there's still a reason to find enjoyment from life.”

“I'm just glad of your strength,” He continued, “ I don't know what I'd do if you weren't as strong as you are.”

“Well, nothing's going to change me Richard and my sight certainly isn't going to come back, so I've got to make the best of it- for that I need you to help me. Do you think we could go for a walk later?” She asked.

It happened to be the best day they had enjoyed together in a long time. Later they walked out along the promenade by the seafront. Horse-drawn carts trotted nimbly to and fro. “Oh doesn't it smell so fresh?” she said, gazing unseeingly out to sea.

Six months had passed since that fine spring day. The nights were now becoming long and dark. Although Mary couldn't see the gas lamps on the promenade lit to ward off the encroaching night, she could certainly feel the creeping blackness. The intervening months had not been happy ones. Mary was now home convalescing after an extended stay in hospital following her operation. As spring had lengthened into summer her condition had become worse. “Take my hand dear,” He said as she felt for the walls, “I'll go first to catch you if you fall.” She mumbled a reply from beneath the veil covering her face. He led her gently down the stairs.

Mary was a changed woman. He didn't know exactly what had happened to change her. It was difficult for him to find out. Every time he had visited her in hospital she had been covered by the same veil that seemed to subdue her now. Now that she was home she spent the majority of her time in her own room. The nurse refused to let him see his wife, or else found excuses for why she was unable to leave her bed that day. This was the first time he had been with her alone. Now he realised just how much things had changed.

She barely said a word. Voicing only her quiet thanks at the small tasks he did for her. She barely drank any of the tea he made for her. Raising her veil slightly to sip. Momentarily revealing only her neck and collar to his gaze.

He thought about asking her to remove the veil. Then thought better of it. It was evidently there in order to protect her delicate eyes from the damaging rays of the sun. It would be selfish of him to ask her to remove it. Risking undoing the surgeon's handiwork for a momentary glance of her beautiful pale face. The right time would come later on.

That afternoon passed slowly. Although a Sunday meal had been prepared Mary had said she did not want to eat. They spent the time sat in silence listening to the tick of the clock. The nurse returned after dark, immediately retiring with Mary to renew her dressings. Richard went to bed early and alone.

Months grew from the weeks that passed and still he sensed little change in his wife. Her condition seemed not to have improved since she returned home. One morning he broached the subject with the nurse as she came down to prepare Mary's breakfast. “When do you think she'll be better?” he asked hesitantly.

“I can't say sir.” she replied looking at the floor.

“I must know,” he urged, “it pains me to see her covered up. She's barely said a word to me since her return.”

“I can't say sir.”

“I must know. She's my wife.”

“Sir, I thought you would know.”

“Know what?!” he said bursting with a desire to know.

“About Mary sir-she's not going to get better.”

“What do you mean!?” he howled.

“I mustn't say sir. Excuse me sir.” She said retreating upstairs.

What did she mean? He thought to himself. How could it be possible? Was that why she hadn't spoken since she had returned. Had the operation not worked? Tomorrow was Sunday. He resolved to question his wife when they met in the afternoon.

Sunday afternoon came. He wished the nurse well as she left for her weekly break. She told him Mary would appear soon. Yet his wife made no appearance. He waited until mid-afternoon. Then he decided to enter into her room.

He inched opened the door. The room was quiet. He could hear no noise. Not even the sound of her breath. Quietly he stepped into the room. He whispered her name. He was answered only be the strong smell of medicine.

He felt the wall with his hand. Looking for the light switch. He found it. Then he found her.

She lay sprawled on the bed. Arms stretched out. There was a piece of paper in her hand.

He froze. Not knowing what to do. There was no noise. Only the ticking of the clock downstairs. The sound marking the passage of time as he held his breath. Matching hers. A minute and a half passed. He could hold no more and released with a gasp. Her chest still hadn't risen.

He let out a wail. “Oh Mary. What have you done. Mary, Mary, Mary. Mary!”

He lifted her veil to gaze upon her face and sank to his knees. He couldn't look.

The face beneath the veil was not the face of his wife.

It wasn't recognisable. The surgeon had made a terrible mess of it's perfect features. Something had evidently gone very, very wrong. How had no-one told him about this? This was the reason his wife had hidden and avoided him. There were no eyes. Only slits for nostrils, a ruin of a mouth and a mass of pink flesh. He couldn't look. What had they done?

He snatched the note from her hand. His eyes desperately scanned the words. Hearing her voice echo in his head.

“*Richard, Don't look now... I haven't been able to face you....The surgeon, he destroyed me...”* He continued reading in dismay, “...*I know I've been a burden on you for so long...you always made me happy. I wanted to make you happy in return. I don't feel like I can do that now. Which is why I'm leaving...You always said you didn't know what you'd do without my courage. Well, I've lost it...I'm setting you free...”*

He tore up the letter. He sank to the floor and pounded the floorboards in anguish. Life had been so cruel to her. He hadn't been able to help her. He hadn't known what to do. Hadn't provided the best care or paid for the best surgeon. It had been his fault. He had killed her.

He in silence on the floor until it began to get dark. Suddenly his brain awakened. The nurse would be back soon.

He dressed himself for walking and hurried from the house before she arrived. Darkness came and the wind and rain drove all from the streets. No-one saw him march down the promenade and take the path to the cliffs.

At the cliff edge he paused. He heard his wife's voice ring in his head “Don't look now...”

With that, he jumped.