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THE DWELLER ON THE THRESHOLD

ROBERT HICHENS

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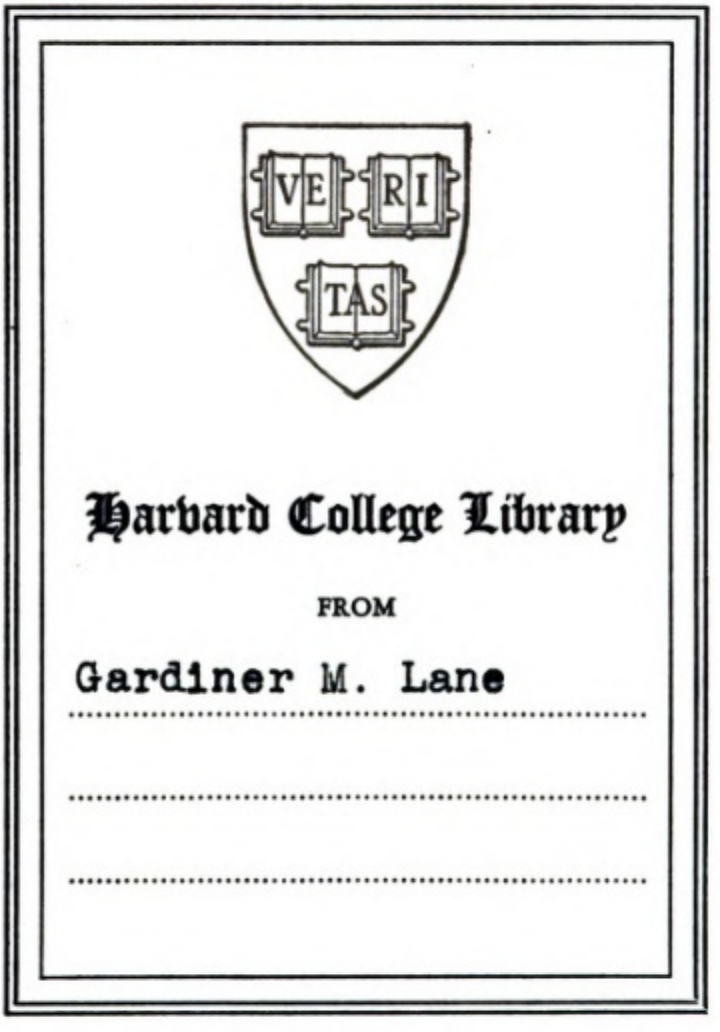

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The Dweller on the Threshold

BY

ROBERT HICHENS

Author of "The Garden of Allah," "Bella Donna," "Egypt and its Monuments," "The Holy Land," etc.

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THE DWELLER ON THE THRESHOLD

I

WHEN Evelyn Malling, notorious because of his sustained interest in Psychical Research and his work for Professor Stepton, first met the Rev. Marcus Harding, that well-known clergyman was still in the full flow of his many activities. He had been translated from his labors in Liverpool to a West End church in London. There he had proved hitherto an astonishing success. On Hospital Sundays the total sums collected from his flock were by far the largest that came from the pockets of any congregation in London. The music in St. Joseph's was allowed by connoisseurs, who knew their Elgar as well as their Goss, their Perosi as well as their Bach, and their Wesley, to be remarkable. Critical persons, mostly men, who sat on the fence between Orthodoxy and Atheism, thought highly

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of Mr. Harding's sermons, and even sometimes came down on his side. And, of all signs surely the most promising for a West End clergyman's success, smart people flocked to him to be married, and Arum lilies were perpetually being carried in and out of his chancel, which was adorned with Morris windows. He was married to a woman who managed to be admirable without being dull, Lady Sophia, daughter of the late Earl of Mansford, and sister of the present peer. He was comfortably off. His health as a rule was good, though occasionally he suffered from some obscure form of dyspepsia. And he was still comparatively young, just forty-eight.

Nevertheless, as Evelyn Malling immediately perceived, Mr. Harding was not a happy man.

In appearance he was remarkable. Of commanding height, with a big frame, a striking head and countenance, and a pair of keen gray eyes, he looked like a man who was intended by nature to dominate. White threads appeared in his thick brown hair, which he wore parted in the middle. But his face, which was clean-shaven, had not many telltale lines. And he did not look more than his age.

The sadness noted by Malling was at first evasive and fleeting, not indellibly fixed in the

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puckers of a forehead, or in the down-drawn corners of a mouth. It was as a thin, almost impalpable mist, that can scarcely be seen, yet that alters all the features in a landscape ever so faintly. Like a shadow it traveled across the eyes, obscured the forehead, lay about the lips. And as a shadow lifts it lifted. But it soon returned, like a thing uneasy that is becoming determined to discover an abiding-place.

Malling's first meeting with the clergyman took place upon Westminster Bridge on an afternoon in early May, when London seemed, almost like a spirited child, to be flinging itself with abandon into the first gaieties of the season. Malling was alone, coming on foot from Waterloo. Mr. Harding was also on foot, with his senior curate, the Rev. Henry Chichester, who was an acquaintance of Malling, but whom Malling had not seen for a considerable period of time, having been out on his estate in Ceylon. At the moment when Malling arrived upon the bridge the two clergymen were standing by the parapet on the Parliament side, looking out over the river. As he drew near to them the curate glanced suddenly round, saw him, and uttered an involuntary exclamation which attracted Mr. Harding's attention.

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"Telepathy!" said Chichester, shaking Malling by the hand. "I believe I looked round because I knew I should see you. Yet I supposed you to be still in Ceylon." He glanced at the rector rather doubtfully, seemed to take a resolution, and with an air almost of doggedness added, "May I?" and introduced the two men to one another.

Mr. Harding observed the new-comer with an interest that was unmistakable.

"You are the Mr. Malling of whom Professor Stepton has spoken to me," he said,—"who has done so much experimental work for him?"

"Yes."

"The professor comes to my church now and then."

"I have heard him say so."

"You saw we were looking at the river? Before I came to London I was at Liverpool, and learned there to love great rivers. There is something in a great river that reminds us —"

He caught his curate's eye and was silent.

"Are you walking my way?" asked Malling. "I am going by the Abbey and Victoria Street to Cadogan Square."

"Then we will accompany you as far as Victoria Station," said the rector.

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"You don't think it would be wiser to take a hansom?" began Chichester. "You remember—"

"No, no, certainly not. Walking always does me good," rejoined Mr. Harding, almost in a tone of rebuke.

The curate said nothing more, and the three men set out toward Parliament Square, Malling walking between the two clergymen.

He felt embarrassed, and this surprised him, for he was an extremely self-reliant man and entirely free from shyness. At first he thought that possibly his odd discomfort arose from the fact that he was in company with two men who, perhaps, had quite recently had a difference which they were endeavoring out of courtesy to conceal from him. Perhaps there had been a slight quarrel over some parish matter. Certainly when he first spoke with them there had been something uneasy, a suspicion of strain, in the manner of both. But then he remembered how, before Chichester had turned round, they had been leaning amicably above the river.

No, it could not be that. He sought mentally for some other reason. But while he did so he talked, and endeavored to rid himself promptly of the unwelcome feeling that beset him.

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In this effort, however, he did not at first succeed. The "conditions" were evidently unsatisfactory. He wondered whether if he were not walking between the two men he would feel more comfortable, and presently, at a crossing, he managed to change his place. He was now next to Mr. Harding, who had the curate on his other side, and at once he felt more at his ease. The rector of St. Joseph's led the conversation, in which Malling joined, and at first the curate was silent. But presently Malling noticed a thing that struck him as odd. Chichester began to "chip in" now and then, and whenever he did so it was either to modify what Mr. Harding had just said, or to check him in what he was saying, or abruptly to introduce a new topic of talk. Sometimes Mr. Harding did not appear to notice these interruptions; at other times he obviously resented them; at others again he yielded with an air of anxiety, almost of fear, to his curate's attenuations or hastened to follow his somewhat surprising leads down new conversational paths. Malling could not understand Chichester. But it became evident to him that for some reason or other the curate was painfully critical of his rector, as sometimes highly sensitive people are

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critical of members of their own family. And Mr. Harding was certainly aware of this critical attitude, and at moments seemed to be defiant of it, at other moments to be almost terrorized by it.

All that passed, be it noted, passed as between gentlemen, rather glided in the form of nuance than trampled heavily in more blatant guise. But Evelyn Malling was a highly trained observer and a man in whom investigation had become a habit. Now that he was no longer ill at ease he became deeply interested in the relations between the two men with whom he was walking. He was unable to understand them, and this fact of course increased his interest. Moreover he was surprised by the change he observed in Chichester.

Although he had never been intimate with Henry Chichester, he had known him fairly well, and had summed him up as a very good man and a decidedly attractive man, but marred, as Malling thought, by a definite weakness of character. He had been too amiable, too ready to take others on their own valuation of themselves, too kind-hearted, and too easily deceived. The gentleness of a saint had been his, but scarcely the firm-

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ness of a saint. Industrious, dutiful, and conscientious, he had not struck Malling as a man of strong intellect, though he was a cultivated and well-educated man. Though not governed by his own passions,— when one looked at him one had been inclined to doubt whether he had any, — he had seemed prone to be governed by those about him, at any rate in little matters of every day. His charm had consisted in his transparent goodness, and in an almost gay kindliness which had seemed to float round him like an atmosphere. To look into his face had been to look at the happiness which comes only to those who do right things, and are at peace with their own souls.

What could have happened to change this charming, if too pliant, personality into the critical, watchful, almost — so at moments it seemed to Malling — aggressive curate who was now, always in a gentlemanly way, making things rather difficult for his rector?

And the matter became the more mysterious when Malling considered Mr. Harding. For here was a man obviously of dominant personality. Despite his fleeting subservience to Chichester, inexplicable to Malling, he was surely by far the stronger of the two, both in intellect and charac-

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ter. Not so saintly, perhaps, he was more likely to influence others. Firmness showed in his forcible chin, energy in the large lines of his mouth, decision in his clear-cut features. Yet there was something contradictory in his face. And the flitting melancholy, already remarked, surely hinted at some secret instability, perhaps known only to Harding himself, perhaps known to Chichester also.

When the three men came to the turning at the corner of the Grosvenor Hotel, Chichester stopped short.

"Here is our way," he said, speaking across Mr. Harding to Malling.

The rector looked at Malling.

"Have you far to go?" he asked, with rather a tentative air.

"I live in Cadogan Square."

"Of course. I remember. You told us you were going there."

"Good-by," said Chichester. "We are taking the underground to South Kensington."

"I think I shall walk," said the rector.

"But you know we are due —"

"There is plenty of time. Tell them I shall be there at four."

"But really —"

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"Punctually at four. I will walk on with Mr. Malling."

"I really think you had better not," began Chichester. "Over-exertion —"

"Am I an invalid?" exclaimed Mr. Harding, almost sharply.

"No, no, of course not. But you remember that yesterday you were not quite well."

"That is the very reason why I wish to walk. Exercise always does my dyspepsia good."

"Let us all walk," said the curate, abruptly.

But this was obviously not Mr. Harding's intention.

"I want you to go through the minutes and the accounts before the meeting," he said, in a quieter but decisive voice. "We will meet at the School at four. You will have plenty of time if you take the train. And meanwhile Mr. Malling and I will go on foot together as far as Cadogan Square."

Chichester stood for a moment staring into Mr. Harding's face, then he said, almost sulkily:

"Very well. Good-by."

He turned on his heel, and was lost in the throng near the station.

It seemed to Malling that an expression of relief overspread his companion's face.

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"You don't mind my company for a little longer, I hope?" said the rector.

"I shall be glad to have it."

They set out on their walk to Cadogan Square. After two or three minutes of silence the rector remarked:

"You know Chichester well?"

"I can hardly say that. I used to meet him sometimes with some friends of mine, the Crespignys. But I have n't seen him for more than two years."

"He 's a very good fellow."

"An excellent fellow."

"Perhaps a little bit limited in his outlook. He has been with me at St. Joseph's exactly two years."

The rector seemed about to say more, then shut his large mouth almost with a snap. Malling made no remark. He was quite certain that snap was merely the preliminary to some further remark about Chichester. And so it proved. As they came to St. Peter's Eaton Square, the rector resumed:

"I often think that it is a man's limitations which make him critical of others. The more one knows, the wider one's outlook, the readier one is to shut one's eyes to the foibles, even to the

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faults, of one's neighbors. I have tried to impress that upon our friend Chichester."

"Does n't he agree with you?"

"Well — it 's difficult to say, difficult to say. Shall we go by Wilton Place, or — ?"

"Certainly."

"Professor Stepton has talked to me about you from time to time, Mr. Malling."

"He 's a remarkable man," said Malling almost with enthusiasm.

"Yes. He 's finding his way to the truth rather by the pathway of science than by the pathway of faith. But he 's a man I respect. And I believe he 'll get out into the light. You 've done a great deal of work for him, I understand, in — in occult directions."

"I have made a good many careful investigations at his suggestion."

"Exactly. Now"— Mr. Harding paused, seemed to make an effort, and continued —"we know very little even now, with all that has been done, as to — to the possibilities — I scarcely know how to put it — the possibilities of the soul."

"Very little indeed," rejoined Malling.

He was considerably surprised by his companion's manner, but was quite resolved not to help him out.

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"The possibilities of one soul, let us say, in connection with another," continued the rector, almost in a faltering voice. "I often feel as if the soul were a sort of mysterious fluid, and that when we what is called influence another person, we, as it were, submerge his soul fluid in our own, as a drop of water might be submerged in an ocean."

"Ah!" said Malling, laconically.

Mr. Harding shot a rather sharp glance at him.

"You don't object to my getting on this subject, I hope?" he observed.

"Certainly not."

"Perhaps you think it rather a strange one for a clergyman to select?"

"Oh, no. I have known many clergymen deeply interested in Stepton's investigations."

Mr. Harding's face, which had been cloudy, cleared.

"It seems to me," he said, "that we clergymen have a special reason for desiring Stepton, and all Stepton's assistants, to make progress. It is true, of course, that we live by faith. And nothing can be more beautiful than a childlike faith in the Great Being who is above all worlds, in the *anima mundi*. But it would be unnatural in us if we did not earnestly desire that our faith be proved, scientifically proved, to be well-founded. I speak now

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of the faith we Christians hold in a life beyond the grave. I know many people who think it very wrong in a clergyman to mix himself up in any occult experiments. But I don't agree with them."

It was now Malling's turn to look sharply at his companion.

"Have you made many experiments yourself, may I ask?" he said very bluntly.

The clergyman started, and was obviously embarrassed by the question.

"I! Oh, I was speaking generally. I am a very busy man, you see. What with my church and my parish, and one thing and another, I get very little time for outside things. Still I am greatly interested, I confess, in all that Stepton is doing."

"Does Mr. Chichester share your interest?" said Malling.

"In a minor degree, in a minor degree," answered the rector, rather evasively.

They were now in Sloane Street and Malling said:

"I must turn off here."

"I 'll go with you as far as your door if you 've no objection," said the rector, who seemed very

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loath to leave his companion. "It 's odd how men change, is n't it?"

"As they grow older? But surely development is natural and to be expected?"

"Certainly. But when a man changes drastically, sheds his character and takes on another?"

"You are talking perhaps of what is called conversion?"

"Well, that would be an instance of what I mean, no doubt. But there are changes of another type. We clergymen, you know, mix intimately with so many men that we are almost bound to become psychologists if we are to do any good. It becomes a habit with many of us to study closely our fellow-men. Now I, for instance; I cannot live at close quarters with a man without, almost unconsciously, subjecting him to a minute scrutiny, and striving to sum him up. My curates, for example —"

"Yes?" said Malling.

"There are four of them, our friend Chichester being the senior one."

"And you have 'placed' them all?"

"I thought I had, I thought so — but —"

Mr. Harding was silent. Then, with a strange abruptness, and the air of a man forced into an

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action against which something within him protested, he said:

"Mr. Malling, you are the only person I know who, having been acquainted with Henry Chichester, has at last met him again after a prolonged interval of separation. Two years, you said. People who see a man from day to day observe very little or nothing. Changes occur and are not noticed by them. A man and his wife live together and grow old. But does either ever notice when the face of the other begins first to lose its bloom, to take on that peculiar, unmistakable stamp that the passage of the years sets on us all? Few of us really see what is always before us. But the man who comes back — he sees. Tell me the honest truth, I beg of you. Do you or do you not, see a great change in Henry Chichester?"

The rector's voice had risen while he spoke, till it almost clamored for reply. His eyes were more clamorous still, insistent in their demand upon Malling. Nevertheless voice and eyes pushed Malling toward caution. Something within him said, "Be careful what you do!" and, acting surprise, he answered:

"Chichester changed! In what way?"

The rector's countenance fell.

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"You have n't observed it?"

"Remember I've only seen him to-day and walking in the midst of crowds."

"Quite true! Quite true!"

Mr. Harding meditated for a minute, and then said:

"Mr. Malling, I daresay my conduct to-day may surprise you. You may think it odd of me to be so frank, seeing that you and I have not met before. But Stepton has told me so much about you that I cannot feel we are quite strangers. I should like you to have an opportunity of observing Henry Chichester without prejudice. I will say nothing more. But if I invite you to meet him, in my house or elsewhere, will you promise me to come?"

"Certainly, if I possibly can."

"And your address?"

Malling stopped and, smiling, pointed to the number outside a house.

"You live here?"

Mr. Harding took a small book and a pencil from his pocket and noted down the address.

"Good-by," he said. "I live in Onslow Gardens — Number 89."

"Thank you. Good-by."

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The two men shook hands. Then Mr. Harding went on his way toward South Kensington, while Malling inserted his latch-key into the door of Number 7b, Cadogan Square.

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II

EVELYN MALLING was well accustomed to meeting with strange people and making investigations into strange occurrences. He was not easily surprised, nor was he easily puzzled. By nature more skeptical than credulous, he had a cool brain, and he was seldom, if ever, the victim of his imagination. But on the evening of the day in question he found himself continually dwelling, and with a curiously heated mind, upon the encounter of that afternoon. Mr. Harding's manner in the latter part of their walk together had — he scarcely knew why — profoundly impressed him. He longed to see the clergyman again. He longed, almost more ardently, to pay a visit to Henry Chichester. Although the instinct of caution, which had perhaps been developed in him by his work among mediums, cranks of various kinds, and charlatans, had prevented him from letting the rector know that he had been struck by the change in the senior curate, that change had greatly astonished him. Yet was it really so very marked? He had noticed it before his at-

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tention had been drawn to it. That he knew. But was he not now, perhaps, exaggerating its character, "suggestioned" as it were by the obvious turmoil of Mr. Harding? He wondered, and was disturbed by his wonderment. Two or three times he got up, with the intention of jumping into a cab, and going to Westminster to find out if Professor Stepton was in town. But he only got as far as the hall. Then something seemed to check him. He told himself that he was in no fit condition to meet the sharp eyes of the man of science, who delighted in his somewhat frigid attitude of mind toward all supposed supernormal manifestations, and he returned to his study and tried to occupy himself with a book.

On the occasion of his last return, just as he was about to sit down, his eyes chanced to fall on an almanac framed in silver which stood on his writing-table. He took it up and stared at it. May 8, Friday — May 9, Saturday — May 10, Sunday. It was May 9. He put the almanac back on the table with a sudden sense of relief. For he had come to a decision.

To-morrow he would attend morning service at St. Joseph's.

Malling was not a regular church-goer. He belonged to the Stepton breed. But he was an earn-

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est man and no scoffer, and some of his best friends were priests and clergymen. Nevertheless it was in a rather unusual go-to-meeting frame of mind that he got into a tail-coat and top hat, and set forth in a hansom to St. Joseph's the next morning.

He had never been there before. As he drew near he found people flowing toward the great church on foot, in cabs and carriages. Evidently Mr. Harding had attractive powers, and Malling began to wonder whether he would have any difficulty in obtaining the seat he wanted, in some corner from which he could get a good view both of the chancel and the pulpit. Were vergers "bribable"? What an ignoramus he was about church matters!

He smiled to himself as he paid the cabman and joined the stream of church-goers which was passing in through the open door.

Just as he was entering the building some one in the crowd by accident jostled him, and he was pushed rather roughly against a tall lady immediately before him. She turned round with a startled face, and Malling hastily begged her pardon.

"I was pushed," he said. "Forgive me."

The lady smiled, her lips moved, doubtless in some words of conventional acceptance, then she

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disappeared in the throng, taking her way toward the left of the church. She was a slim woman, with a white streak in her dark hair just above the forehead. Her face, which was refined and handsome, had given to Malling a strong impression of anxiety. Even when it had smiled it had looked almost tragically anxious, he thought. The church was seated with chairs, and a man, evidently an attendant, told him that all the chairs in the right and left aisles were free. He made his way to the right, and was fortunate enough to get one not far from the pulpit. Unluckily, from it he could only see the left-hand side of the choir. But the preacher would be full in his view. The organ sounded; the procession appeared. Over the heads of worshipers — he was a tall man — Malling perceived both Mr. Harding and Chichester. The latter took his place at the end of the left-hand row of light-colored oaken stalls next to the congregation. Malling could see him well. But the rector was hidden from him. He fixed his eyes upon Chichester.

The service went on its way. The music was excellent. A fair young man, who looked as if he might be a first-rate cricketer, one of the curates no doubt, read the lessons. Chichester intoned with an agreeable light tenor voice. During the

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third hymn, " Fight the Good Fight," Mr. Harding mounted into the pulpit. He let down the brass reading-desk. He had no notes in his hands. Evidently he was going to preach extempore. After the " In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost " had been pronounced, Malling settled himself to listen. He felt tensely interested. Both Mr. Harding and Chichester were now before him, the one as performer — he used the word mentally, with no thought of irreverence — the other as audience. He could study both as he wished to study them at that moment.

Chichester was a small, cherubic man, with blue eyes, fair hair, and neat features, the sort of man who looks as if when a boy he must have been the leading choir-boy in a cathedral. There was nothing powerful in his face, but much that was amiable and winning. His chin and his forehead were rather weak. His eyes and his mouth looked good. Or — did they?

Malling found himself wondering as Mr. Harding preached.

And was Mr. Harding the powerful preacher he was reputed to be?

At first he held his congregation. That was evident. Rows of rapt faces gazed up at him, as

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