

# The Prayer

Algernon Blackwood

There was a glitter in the eye of O'Malley when they met. "I've got it!" he said under his breath, holding out a tiny phial with the ominous red label.

"Got what?" asked Jones, as though he didn't know. Both were medical students; both of a speculative and adventurous turn of mind as well; the Irishman, however, ever the leader in mischief.

"The stuff!" was the reply. "The recipe the Hindu gave me. Your night's free, isn't it? Mine, too. We'll try it. Eh?"

They eyed the little bottle with its shouting label—Poison. Jones took it up, fingered it, drew the cork, sniffed it. "Ugh!" he exclaimed, "it's got an awful smell. Don't think I could swallow that!"

"You don't swallow it," answered O'Malley impatiently. "You sniff it up through the nose—just a drop. It goes down the throat that way."

"Irish swallowing, eh?" laughed Jones uneasily. "It looks wicked to me." He played with the bottle, till the other snatched it away.

"Look out, man! Begad, there's enough there to kill a Cabinet Minister, or a horse. It's the real stuff, I tell you. I told him it was for a psychical experiment. You remember the talk we had that night—"

"Oh, I remember well enough. But it's not worth while in my opinion. It will only make us sick." He said it almost angrily. "Besides, we've got enough hallucinations in life already without inducing others—"

O'Malley glanced up quickly. "Nothing of the sort," he snapped. "You're backing out. You swore you'd try it with me if I got it. The effect—"

"Well, what is the effect?"

The Irishman looked keenly at him. He answered very low. Evidently he said something he really believed. There was gravity, almost solemnity, in his voice and manner.

"Opens the inner sight," he whispered darkly. "Makes you sensitive to thoughts and

thoughtforces.” He paused a moment, staring hard into the other’s eyes. “For instance,” he added slowly, earnestly, “if somebody’s thinking hard about *you*, I should twig it. See? I should *see* the thought-stream getting at you—influencing you—making you do this and that. The air is full of loose and wandering thoughts from other minds. I should see these thoughts hovering about your mind like flies trying to settle. Understand? The cause of a sudden change of mood in a man, an inspiration, a helping thought—a temptation—!”

“Bosh!”

“Are you afraid?”

“No. But it’s a poisonous doctrine—that such experiments are worth while even if—if—”

But O’Malley knew his pal... They took the prescribed dose together, laughing, scoffing, hoping. Then they went out to dine. “We must eat very little,” explained the Irishman. “The stomach must be comparatively empty. And drink nothing at all.”

“What a bore!” said Jones, who was always hungry, and usually thirsty. The prescribed hour passed between the taking of the dose and dinner. They felt nothing more than what Jones described as a “beastly uncomfortable sort of inner heat.”

Opposite them, at a table alone, sat a small man, over-dressed according to their standards, and wearing diamond rings. His face had a curious mixture of refinement and wickedness—like a man naturally sensitive whom circumstances, indulgence, or some special temptation had led astray. He did not notice their somewhat close attention because, in his turn, he was closely watching—somebody else. He ate and drank soberly, but drew his dinner out. The “somebody else” he watched, obviously enough, was a country couple, up probably for the festivities due to the presence of a foreign Potentate in town. They were bewildered by big London. They carried hand-bags. From time to time the old man fingered his breast-pocket. He looked about him nervously. The be-ringed man was kind to them, lent them his newspaper, passed the salt, gave them scraps of favoured, kind, and sympathetic conversation. He was very gentle with them.

“Feel anything yet?” asked O’Malley for the tenth time, noticing a curious, passing look on his companion’s face. “I don’t feel a blessed thing meself! I believe that chemist fooled me, gave me diluted stuff or something—” He stopped short, caught by the other’s eye. They had been dining very sparingly, much to the disgust of the waiter, who wanted their table for more remunerative customers.

“I do feel something, yes,” was the quiet reply. “Or, rather, I *see* something. It’s odd; but I really do—”

“What? Out with it! Tell me!”

“A sort of wavy line of gold,” said Jones calmly, “gold and shining. And sometimes it’s white. It flits about that fellow’s head—that fellow over there.” He indicated the man with the rings. “Almost as if—it were trying to get into him—”

“Bosh!” said O’Malley, who was ever the last to believe in the success of his own experiments. “You swear it?”

The other’s face convinced him, and a thrill went down his Irish spine.

“Hush,” said Jones in a lower tone, “don’t shout. I see it right enough. It’s like a little wavy stream of light. It’s going all about his head and eyes. By gad, it’s lovely, though—it’s like a flower now, a floating blossom—and now a strip of thin soft gold. It’s got him! By George, I tell you, it’s got him—!”

“Got him?” echoed the Irishman, genuinely impressed.

“Got *into* him, I meant. It’s disappeared—gone clean into his head. Look!”

O’Malley looked hard, but saw nothing. “Me boy!” he cried, “the stuff *was* real. It’s working. Watch it. I do believe you’ve seen a thought—a thought from somebody else—a wandering thought. It’s got into his mind. It may affect his actions, movements, decisions. Good Lord! The stuff was not diluted, after all. You’ve seen a thought-force!” He was tremendously excited. Jones, however, was too absorbed in what he saw to feel excitement. Whether it was due to the drug or not, he knew he saw a real thing.

“Wonder if it’s a good one or a bad one!” whispered the Irishman. “Wonder what sort of mind it comes from! Where? How far away?” He wondered a number of things. He chattered below his breath like a dying gramophone. But his companion just sat, staring in rapt silence.

“What are *you* doing here?” said a voice from the table behind them quietly. And O’Malley, turning—Jones was too preoccupied—recognised a plain-clothes detective whom he chanced to know from having been associated with him in a recent poisoning case.

“Nothing particular; just having dinner,” he answered. “And you?”

The detective made no secret of his object. “Watching the crowds for their own safety,” he said, “that’s all. London’s full of prey just now—all up from the country, with their bags in their hands, their money in their breast-pockets, and good-natured folks ready everywhere to help ’em, and help themselves at the same time.” He laughed, nodding towards the man

with the rings. “All the crooks are on the job,” he added significantly. “There’s an old friend of ours. He doesn’t know *me*, but I know him right enough. He’s usually made up as a clergyman; and to-night he’s after that old couple at the nex’ table, or my name ain’t Joe Leary! Don’t stare, or he’ll notice.” He turned his head the other way.

O’Malley, however, was far too interested in hoping for a psychical experience of his own, and in watching the “alleged phenomena” of his companion, to feel much interest in a mere detective’s hunt for pickpockets. He turned towards his friend again. “What’s up now?” he asked, with his back to the detective; “see anything more?”

“It’s perfectly wonderful,” whispered Jones softly. “It’s out again. I can see the gold thread, all shining and alive, clean down in the man’s mind and heart, then out, then in again. It’s making him different—I swear it is. By George, it’s like a blessed chemical experiment. I can’t explain it as I see it, but he’s getting sort of bright within—golden like the thread.” Jones was wrought up, excited, moved. It was impossible to doubt his earnestness. He described a thing he really saw. O’Malley listened with envy and resentment.

“Blast it all!” he exclaimed. “I see nothing. I didn’t take enough!” And he drew the little phial out of his pocket.

“Look! He’s *changed!*” exclaimed Jones, interrupting the movement so suddenly that O’Malley dropped the phial and it smashed to atoms against the iron edge of the umbrella-stand. “His thought’s altered. He’s going out. The gold has spread all through him—!”

“By gosh!” put in O’Malley, so loud that people stared, “it’s helped him—made him a better man—turned him from evil. It’s that blessed wandering thought! Follow it, follow it! Quick!” And in the general confusion that came with the paying of bills, cleaning up the broken glass, and the rest, the “crook” slipped out into the crowd and was lost, the detective murmured something about “wonder what made him leave so good a trail!” and the Irishman filled in the pauses with hurried, nervous sentences—“Keep your eye on the line of gold! We’ll follow it! We’ll trace it to its source. Never mind the tip! Hurry, hurry! Don’t lose it!”

But Jones was already out, drawn by the power of his obvious conviction. They went into the street. Regardless of the blaze of lights and blur of shadows, the noise of traffic and the rush of the crowds, they followed what Jones described as the “line of wavy gold.”

“Don’t lose it! For Heaven’s sake, don’t lose it!” O’Malley cried, dodging with difficulty after the disappearing figure. “It’s a genuine thought-force from another mind. Follow it! Trace it! We’ll track it to its source—some noble thinker somewhere—some gracious woman—some exalted, golden source, at any rate!” He was wholly caught away now by the splendour of the experiment’s success. A thought that could make a criminal change his mind must

issue from a radiant well of rare and purest thinking. He remembered the Hindu's words: "You will see thoughts in colour—bad ones, lurid and streaked—good ones, sweet and shining, like a line of golden light—and if you follow, you may trace them to the mind that sent them out."

"It goes so fast!" Jones called back, "I can hardly keep up. It's in the air, just over the heads of the crowd. It leaves a trail like a meteor. Come on, come on!"

"Take a taxi," shouted the Irishman. "It'll escape us!" They laughed, and panted, dodged past the stream of people, crossed the street.

"Shut up!" answered Jones. "Don't talk so much. I lose it when you talk. It's in my mind. I really see it, but your chatter blurs it. Come on, come on!"

And so they came at last to the region of mean streets, where the traffic was less, the shadows deeper, the lights dim, streets that visiting Emperors do not change. No match-sellers, bootlace venders, or "dreadful shadows proffering toys," blocked their way on the pavement edge, because here were none to buy.

"It's changed from gold to white," Jones whispered breathlessly. "It shines now—by gad, it shines—like a bit of escaped sunrise. And others have joined it. Can't you see 'em? Why, they're like a network. They're rays—rays of glory. And—hullo!—I see where they come from now! It's that house over there. Look, man, look! They're streaming like a river of light out of that high window, that little attic window up there"—he pointed to a dingy house standing black against the murk of the sky. "They come out in a big stream, and then separate in all directions. It's simply wonderful!"

O'Malley gasped and panted. He said nothing. Jones, the phlegmatic, heavy Jones, had got a real vision, whereas he who always imagined "visions" got nothing. He followed the lead. Jones, he understood, was taking his instinct where it led him. He would not interfere.

And the instinct led him to the door. They stopped dead, hesitating for the first time. "Better not go in, you know," said O'Malley, breaking the decision he had just made. Jones looked up at him, slightly bewildered. "I've lost it," he whispered, "lost the line——" A taxi-cab drew up with a rattling thunder just in front and a man got out, came up to the door and stood beside them. It was the crook.

For a second or two the three men eyed each other. Clearly the new arrival did not recognise them. "Pardon, gentlemen," he said, pushing past to pull the bell. They saw his rings. The taxi boomed away down the little dark street that knew more of coal-carts than of motors. "You're coming in?" the man asked, as the door opened and he stepped inside. O'Malley, usually so quick-witted, found no word to say, but Jones had a question ready. The

Irishman never understood how he asked it, and got the answer, too, without giving offence. The instinct guided him in choice of words and tone and gesture—somehow or other. He asked who lived upstairs in the front attic room, and the man, as he quietly closed the door upon them, gave the information—“My father.”

And, for the rest, all they ever learnt—by a little diligent inquiry up and down the street, engineered by Jones—was that the old man, bedridden for a dozen years, was never seen, and that an occasional district-visitor, or such like, were his only callers. But they all agreed that he was good. “They do say he lies there praying day and night—jest praying for the world.” It was the grocer at the corner who told them that.

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