

**Author:** H.G. Wells (1866-1946)

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## The Presence by the Fire

H.G. Wells

It never occurred to Reid that his wife lay dying until the very last day of her illness. He was a man of singularly healthy disposition, averse on principle to painful thoughts, and I doubt if in the whole of his married life his mind had dwelt for five minutes together on the possibility of his losing her.

They were both young, and intimate companions—such companions as many desire to be and few become. And perhaps it was her sense of the value of this rare companionship that made her, when first her health declined, run many an avoidable risk rather than leave him to go his way alone.

He was sorry that she was ill, sorry she should suffer, and he missed her, as she lay upstairs, in a thousand ways; but though the doctor was mindful to say all the “preparatory” phrases of his profession, and though her sister spoke, as she conceived, quite plainly, it was as hard for him to understand that this was more than a temporary interruption of their life, as it would have been to believe that the sun would not rise again after tomorrow morning.

The day before she died he was restless, and after wandering about the house and taking a short walk, he occupied himself in planting out her evening primroses—a thing she had made a point of doing now for ten springs in succession. The garden she had always tended, he said, should not seem neglected when she came down again. He had rather his own work got in arrears than that this should happen.

The first realisation, when the doctor, finding all conventional euphemisms useless, told him the fact at last in stark, plain words, stunned him. Even then it is doubtful if he believed. He said not a word in answer, but the colour left his face, and the lines about his mouth hardened. And he walked softly and with white, expressionless features into her room.

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He stood at the door-way, and looked for a minute at her thin little features, with the eyes closed and two little lines between the brows, then went and knelt by the bed and looked closely into her face. She did not move until he touched her hair and very softly whispered her name.

Then her eyes opened for a moment, and he saw that she knew him. Her lips moved, and it seemed that she whispered one of those foolish, tender little names that happy married folk delight in inventing for one another, and then she gathered her strength as if with an effort to speak distinctly. He bent mechanically and heard the last syllables of *au revoir*.

For a moment he did not clearly understand what the words were. That was all she said, and as for him, he answered not a word. He put his hand in hers, and she pressed it faintly and then more faintly. He kissed her forehead with dry lips, and the little lines of pain there faded slowly into peace.

For an hour they let him kneel, until the end had come; and all that time he never stirred. Then they had to tap his shoulder to rouse him from his rigour. He got up slowly, bent over her for a moment, looking down into her tranquil face, and then allowed them to lead him away.

That was how Reid parted from his wife, and for days after he behaved as a man who had been suddenly deprived of all initiative. He did no work; he went nowhere outside the house; he ate, drank and slept mechanically; and he did not even seem to suffer actively. For the most part, he sat stupidly at his desk or wandered about the big garden, looking with dull eyes at the little green buds that were now swiftly opening all about him. Not a soul ventured to speak to him of his loss, albeit those who did not know him might have judged his mood one of absolute apathy.

But nearly a week after the funeral the floodgates of his sorrow were opened. Quite suddenly the thing came upon him. Her sister heard him walk into the study and throw himself into a chair. Everything was still for a space, and then he sprang up again and she heard him wailing, "Mary! Mary!" and then he ran, sobbing violently and stumbling, along the passage to his room. It was grotesquely like a little child that had suddenly been hurt.

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He locked his door; and her sister, fearing what might happen, went along the passage. She thought of rapping at the door, but on second thoughts she refrained. After listening awhile she went away.

It was long after the first violence of his grief had passed that Reid first spoke of his feelings. He who had been a matter-of-fact materialist was converted, I found, to a belief in immortality by the pitiless logic of her uncompleted life. But I think it was an imperfect, a doubting, belief even at the best. And to strengthen it, perhaps, he began to show a growing interest in the inquiries of those who were sifting whatever evidence there may be of the return of those who are dead.

“For I want my wife now,” said he. “I want her in this life. I want her about me—her comfort, her presence. What does it matter that I shall meet her again when I am changed, and she is changed? It was the dear trivialities, the little moments, the touch of her hand, the sound of her voice in the room with me, her distant singing in the garden, and her footfall on the stairs. If I could believe that,” he said, “if I could believe—”

And in that spirit it was that he kept to the old home, and would scarcely bear that a thing within or without should be altered in any way. The white curtains that had been there the last autumn hung dirty in the windows, and the little desk that had been her own in the study stood there still, with the pen thrown down as he fancied she had left it.

“Here, if anywhere,” he said, “she is at home. Here, if anywhere, her presence lives.”

Her sister left him when a housekeeper was obtained, and he went on living there alone, working little and communicating for the most part with these dead memories. After a time he loved nothing so much as to talk to her, and I think in those days that I was of service to him. He would take me about the house, pointing to this trivial thing and that; and telling me some little act of hers that he linked therewith. And he always spoke of her as one who still lived.

“She does” so and so, he would say; “she likes” so and so. We would pace up and down the rich lawn of his house. “My wife is particularly fond

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of those big white lilies,” he would say, “and this year they are finer than ever.” So the summer passed and the autumn came.

And one day late in the evening he came to me, walking round the house and tapping at the French window of my study, and as he came in out of the night I noticed how deadly white and sunken his face was and how bright his eyes.

“I have seen her,” he said to me, in a low, clear voice. “She has visited me. I knew she was watching me and near me. I have felt her presence for weeks and weeks. And now she has come.”

He was intensely excited, and it was some time before I could get any clear story from him.

He had been sitting by the fire in his study, musing, no doubt going over for the hundredth time, day by day and almost hour by hour as he was wont to do, one of the summer holidays they had spent together. He was staring, he said, into the glowing coals, and almost imperceptibly it was that there grew upon him the persuasion that he was not alone. The thought took shape slowly in his mind, but with a strange quality of absolute conviction, that she was sitting in the armchair in front of him, as she had done so often in the old days, and watching him a-dreaming. For a moment he did not dare to look up, lest he should find this a mere delusion.

Then slowly he raised his eyes. He was dimly aware of footsteps advancing along the passage as he did so. A wave of bitter disappointment swept over him as he saw the chair was empty, and this incontinently gave place to a tumult of surprise and joyful emotion. For he saw her—saw her distinctly. She was standing behind the chair, leaning over the back of it, and smiling the tender smile he knew so well. So in her life she had stood many a time and listened to him, smiling gently. The firelight played upon her face.

“I saw her as plainly as I see you,” he said. “I saw the smile in her eyes, and my heart leapt out to her.”

For a moment he was motionless, entranced, and with an instantaneous appreciation of the transitoriness of this appearance. Then suddenly the door opened, the shadows in the room rushed headlong, and

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the housemaid came in with his lamp lit and without the shade—a dazzling glare of naked flame. The yellow light splashed over the room and brought out everything clear and vivid.

By mere reflex action he turned his head at the sound of the door-handle, and forthwith turned it back again. But the face he had longed for so patiently had vanished with the shadows before the light. Everything was abruptly plain and material. The girl replenished the fire, moved the armchair on one side, and took away the scuttle lining to refill it with coals. A curious bashfulness made Reid pretend to make notes at his table until these offices were accomplished. Then he looked across the fireplace again, and the room was empty. The sense of her presence, too, had gone. He called upon her name again and again, rubbed his eyes, and tried to force her return by concentrating his mind upon her. But nothing availed. He could see her no more.

He allowed me to cross-examine him in the most detailed way upon this story. His manner was so sane, so convincing, and his honesty so indisputable, that I went to bed that night with my beliefs and disbeliefs greatly shaken. Hitherto I had doubted every ghost story I had heard; but here at last was one of a different quality. Indeed, I went to bed that night an unwilling convert to the belief in the phantasms of those who are dead and all that that belief implies.

My faith in Reid was confirmed by the fact that from late August, when this happened, until December he did not see the apparition again. Had it been an hallucination begotten of his own intense brooding it must inevitably have recurred. But it was presently to be proved beyond all question that the thing he saw was an exterior presence. Night after night he sat in his study, longing for the repetition of that strange experience; and at last, after many nights, he saw her for the second time.

It was earlier in the evening, but with the shorter winter days the room was already dark. Once more he looked into his study fire, and once more that fire glowed redly. Then there came the same sense of her presence, the same hesitation before he raised his eyes. But this time he looked over the chair at once and saw her without any flash of disappointment.

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At the instant he felt not the faintest suspicion that his senses deceived him. For a moment he was dumb. He was seized with an intense longing to touch her hand. Then came into his head some half-forgotten story that one must speak first to a spirit. He leant forward.

“Mary!” he said very softly. But she neither moved nor spoke. And then suddenly it seemed that she grew less distinct.

“Mary!” he whispered, with a sudden pang of doubt. Her features grew unfamiliar.

Then suddenly he rose to his feet, and as he did so the making of the illusion was demonstrated. The high light on a vase that had been her cheek moved to the right; the shadow that had been her arm moved to the left.

Few people realise how little we actually see of what is before our eyes: a patch of light, a patch of shadow, and all the rest our memory and our imagination supply. A chance grouping of dim forms in the dusky firelit study had furnished all the suggestion his longing senses had required. His eyes and his heart and the humour of chance had cheated him.

He stood there staring. For a moment the disintegration of the figure filled him with a sense of grotesque horror and dismay. For a moment it seemed beyond the sanity of things. Then, as he realised the deception his senses had contrived, he sat down again, put his elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands.

About ten he came and told me. He told me in a clear hard voice, without a touch of emotion, recording a remarkable fact. “As I told you the other thing, it is only right that I should tell you this,” he said.

Then he sat silently for a space. “She will come no more,” he said at last. “She will come no more.”

And suddenly he rose, and without a greeting, passed out into the night.