## The Choice of Amyntas

W. Somerset Maugham

### I

Often enough the lover of cities tires of their unceasing noise; the din of the traffic buzzes perpetually in his ears, and even in the silences of night he hears the footfalls on the pavement, the dull stamping of horses, the screeching of wheels; the fog chokes up the lungs so that he cannot breathe; he sees no longer any charms in the tall chimneys of the factory and the heavy smoke winding in curves against the leaden sky; then he flies to countries where the greenness is like cold spring water, where he can hear the budding of the trees and the stars tell him fantastic things, the silence is full of mysterious new emotions. And so the writer sometimes grows weary to death of the life he sees, and he presses his hands before his eyes, that he may hide from him the endless failure in the endless quest; then he too sets sail for Bohemia by the Sea, and the other countries of the Frankly Impossible, where men are always brave and women ever beautiful; there the tears of the morning are followed by laughter at night, trials are easily surmountable, virtue is always triumphant; there no illusions are lost, and lovers live ever happily in a world without end.

### II

Once upon a time, very long ago, when the world was younger and more wicked than it is now, there lived in the West Country a man called Peter the Schoolmaster. But he was very different from ordinary schoolmasters, for he was a scholar and a man of letters; he was consequently very poor. All his life he had pored over old books and musty parchments; but from them he had acquired little wisdom, for one bright spring—time he fell in love with a farmer’s daughter—and married her. The farmer’s daughter was a buxom wench, and, to the schoolmaster’s delight—he had a careless, charming soul—she presented him in course of time with a round dozen of sturdy children. Peter compared himself with Priam of Troy, with Jacob, with King Solomon of Israel and with Queen Anne of England. Peter wrote a Latin ode to each offspring in turn, which he recited to the assembled multitude when the midwife put into his arms for the first time the new arrival. There was great rejoicing over the birth of every one of the twelve children; but, as was most proper in a land of primogeniture, the chiefest joy was the first—born; and to him Peter wrote an Horatian ode, which was two stanzas longer than the longest Horace ever wrote. Peter vowed that no infant had ever been given the world’s greeting in so magnificent a manner; certainly he had never himself surpassed that first essay. As he told the parson, to write twelve odes on paternity, twelve greetings to the new—born soul, is a severe tax even on the most fertile imagination.

But the object of all this eloquence was the cause of the first and only quarrel between the gentle schoolmaster and his spouse; for the learned man had dug out of one of his old books the name of Amyntas, and Amyntas he vowed should be the name of his son; so with that trisyllable he finished every stanza of his ode. His wife threw her head back, and, putting her hands on her hips, stood with arms akimbo; she said that never in all her born days had she heard of anyone being called by such a name, which was more fit for a heathen idol than for a plain, straightforward member of the church by law established. In its stead she suggested that the boy be called Peter, after his father, or John, after hers. The gentle schoolmaster was in the habit of giving way to his wife in all things, and it may be surmised that this was the reason why the pair had lived in happiest concord; but now he was firm! He said it was impossible to call the boy by any other name than Amyntas.

‘The name is necessary to the metre of my ode,’ he said. ‘It is its very life. How can I finish my stanzas with Petrus or Johannes? I would sooner die.’

His wife did not think the ode mattered a rap. Peter turned pale with emotion; he could scarcely express himself.

‘Every mother in England has had a child; children have been born since the days of Cain and Abel thicker than the sands of the sea. What is a child? But an ode—my ode! A child is but an ordinary product of man and woman, but a poem is a divine product of the Muses. My poem is sacred; it shall not be defiled by any Petrus or Johannes! Let my house fall about my head, let my household gods be scattered abroad, let the Fates with their serpent hair render desolate my hearth; but do not rob me of my verse. I would sooner lose the light of my eyes than the light of my verse! Ah! let me wander through the land like Homer, sightless, homeless; let me beg my bread from door to door, and I will sing the ode, the ode to Amyntas.’ ...

He said all this with so much feeling that Mrs Peter began to cry, and, with her apron up to her eyes, said that she didn’t want him to go blind; but even if he did, he should never want, for she would work herself to the bone to keep him. Peter waved his hand in tragic deprecation. No, he would beg his bread from door to door; he would sleep by the roadside in the bitter winter night.

Now, the parson was present during this colloquy, and he proposed an arrangement; and finally it was settled that Peter should have his way in this case, but that Mrs Peter should have the naming of all subsequent additions to the family. So, of the rest, one was called Peter, and one was called John, and there was a Mary, and a Jane, and a Sarah; but the eldest, according to agreement, was christened Amyntas, although to her dying day, notwithstanding the parson’s assurances, the mother was convinced in her heart of hearts that the name was papistical and not fit for a plain, straightforward member of the church by law established.

### III

Now, it was as clear as a pikestaff to Peter the Schoolmaster that a person called Amyntas could not go through the world like any other ordinary being; so he devoted particular care to his son’s education, teaching him, which was the way of schoolmasters then as now, very many entirely useless things, and nothing that could be to him of the slightest service in earning his bread and butter.

But twelve children cannot be brought up on limpid air, and there were often difficulties when new boots were wanted; sometimes, indeed, there were difficulties when bread and meat and puddings were wanted. Such things did not affect Peter; he felt not the pangs of hunger as he read his books, and he vastly preferred to use the white and the yolk of an egg in the restoration of an old leather binding than to have it solemnly cooked and thrust into his belly. What cared he for the rantings of his wife and the crying of the children when he could wander in imagination on Mount Ida, clad only in his beauty, and the three goddesses came to him promising wonderful things? He was a tall, lean man, with thin, white hair and blue eyes, but his wrinkled cheeks were still rosy; incessant snuff—taking had given a special character to his nose. And sometimes, taking upon him the spirit of Catullus, he wrote verses to Lesbia, or, beneath the breast—plate of Marcus Aurelius, he felt his heart beat bravely as he marched against the barbarians; he was Launcelot, and he made charming speeches to Guinevere as he kissed her long white hand....

But now and then the clamour of the outer world became too strong, and he had to face seriously the question of his children’s appetite.

It was on one of these occasions that the schoolmaster called his son to his study and said to him,—

‘Amyntas, you are now eighteen years of age. I have taught you all I know, and you have profited by my teaching; you know Greek and Latin as well as I do myself; you are well acquainted with Horace and Tully; you have read Homer and Aristotle; and added to this, you can read the Bible in the original Hebrew. That is to say, you have all knowledge at your fingers’ ends, and you are prepared to go forth and conquer the world. Your mother will make a bundle of your clothes; I will give you my blessing and a guinea, and you can start to—morrow.’

Then he returned to his study of an oration of Isocrates. Amyntas was thunder—struck.

‘But, father, where am I to go?’

The schoolmaster raised his head in surprise, looking at his son over the top of his spectacles.

‘My son,’ he said, with a wave of the arm; ’my son, you have the world before you—is that not enough?’

‘Yes, father,’ said Amyntas, who thought it was a great deal too much; ‘but what am I to do? I can’t get very far on a guinea.’

‘Amyntas,’ answered Peter, rising from his chair with great dignity, ‘have you profited so ill by the examples of antiquity, which you have had placed before you from your earliest years? Do you not know that riches consist in an equal mind, and happiness in golden mediocrity? Did the wise Odysseus quail before the unknown, because he had only a guinea in his pocket? Shame on the heart that doubts! Leave me, my son, and make ready.’

Amyntas, very crestfallen, left the room and went to his mother to acquaint her with the occurrence. She was occupied in the performance of the family’s toilet.

‘Well, my boy,’ she said, as she scrubbed the face of the last but one, ‘it’s about time that you set about doing something to earn your living, I must say. Now, if instead of learning all this popish stuff about Greek and Latin and Lord knows what, you’d learnt to milk a cow or groom a horse you’d be as right as a trivet now. Well, I’ll put you up a few things in a bundle as your father says and you can start early to—morrow morning.... Now then, darling,’ she added, turning to her Benjamin, ‘come and have your face washed, there’s a dear.’

### IV

Amyntas scratched his head, and presently an inspiration came to him.

‘I will go to the parson,’ he said.

The parson had been hunting, and he was sitting in his study in a great oak chair, drinking a bottle of port; his huge body and his red face expressed the very completest satisfaction with the world in general; one felt that he would go to bed that night with the cheerful happiness of duty performed, and snore stentoriously for twelve hours. He was troubled by no qualms of conscience; the Thirty—nine Articles caused him never a doubt, and it had never occurred to him to concern himself with the condition of the working classes. He lived in a golden age, when the pauper was allowed to drink himself to death as well as the nobleman, and no clergyman’s wife read tracts by his bedside....

Amyntas told his news.

‘Well, my boy’—he never spoke but he shouted—’so you’re going away? Well, God bless you!’

Amyntas looked at him expectantly, and the parson, wondering what he expected, came to the conclusion that it was a glass of port, for at that moment he was able to imagine nothing that man could desire more. He smiled benignly upon Amyntas, and poured him out a glass.

‘Drink that, my boy. Keep it in your memory. It’s the finest thing in the world. It’s port that’s made England what she is!’

Amyntas drank the port, but his face did not express due satisfaction.

‘Damn the boy!’ said the parson. ‘Port’s wasted on him.’ ... Then, thinking again what Amyntas might want, he rose slowly from his chair, stretching his legs. ‘I’m not so young as I used to be; I get stiff after a day’s hunting.’ He walked round his room, looking at his bookshelves; at last he picked out a book and blew the dust off the edges. ‘Here’s a Bible for you, Amyntas. The two finest things in the world are port and the Bible.’

Amyntas thanked him, but without great enthusiasm. Another idea struck the parson, and he shouted out another question.

‘Have you any money?’

Amyntas told him of the guinea.

‘Damn your father! What’s the good of a guinea?’ He went to a drawer and pulled out a handful of gold—the tithes had been paid a couple of days before. ‘Here are ten; a man can go to hell on ten guineas.’

‘Thank you very much, sir,’ said Amyntas, pocketing the money, ‘but I don’t think I want to go quite so far just yet.’

‘Then where the devil do you want to go?’ shouted the parson.

‘That’s just what I came to ask you about.’

‘Why didn’t you say so at once? I thought you wanted a glass of port. I’d sooner give ten men advice than one man port.’ He went to the door and called out, ‘Jane, bring me another bottle.’ He drank the bottle in silence, while Amyntas stood before him, resting now upon one leg now upon another, turning his cap round and round in his hands. At last the parson spoke.

‘You may look upon a bottle of port in two ways,’ he said; ‘you may take it as a symbol of a happy life or as a method of thought.... There are four glasses in a bottle. The first glass is full of expectation; you enter life with mingled feelings; you cannot tell whether it will be good or no. The second glass has the full savour of the grape; it is youth with vine—leaves in its hair and the passion of young blood. The third glass is void of emotion; it is grave and calm, like middle age; drink it slowly, you are in full possession of yourself, and it will not come again. The fourth glass has the sadness of death and the bitter sweetness of retrospect.’

He paused a moment for Amyntas to weigh his words.

‘But a bottle of port is a better method of thought than any taught by the school—men. The first glass is that of contemplation—I think of your case; the second is apprehension—an idea occurs to me; the third is elaboration—I examine the idea and weigh the pros and cons; the fourth is realisation—and here I give you the completed scheme. Look at this letter; it is from my old friend Van Tiefel, a Dutch merchant who lives at Cadiz, asking for an English clerk. One of his ships is sailing from Plymouth next Sunday, and it will put in at Cadiz on the way to Turkey.’

Amyntas thought the project could have been formed without a bottle of port, but he was too discreet to say so, and heartily thanked the parson. The good man lived in a time when teetotalism had not ruined the clergy’s nerves, and sanctity was not considered incompatible with a good digestion and common humanity....

### V

Amyntas spent the evening bidding tender farewells to a round dozen of village beauties, whose susceptible hearts had not been proof against the brown eyes and the dimples of the youth. There was indeed woe when he spread the news of his departure; and all those maiden eyes ran streams of salt tears as he bade them one by one good—bye; and though he squeezed their hands and kissed their lips, vowing them one and all the most unalterable fidelity, they were perfectly inconsolable. It is an interesting fact to notice that the instincts of the true hero are invariably polygamic....

It was lucky for Amyntas that the parson had given him money, for his father, though he gave him a copy of the *Ethics of Aristotle* and his blessing, forgot the guinea; and Amyntas was too fearful of another reproach to remind him of it.

Amyntas was up with the lark, and having eaten as largely as he could in his uncertainty of the future, made ready to start. The schoolmaster had retired to his study to conceal his agitation; he was sitting like Agamemnon with a dishcloth over his head, because he felt his face unable to express his emotion. But the boy’s mother stood at the cottage door, wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron, surrounded by her weeping children. She threw her arms about her son’s neck, giving him a loud kiss on either cheek, and Amyntas went the round of his brothers and sisters, kissing them and bidding them not forget him. To console them, he promised to bring back green parrots and golden bracelets, and embroidered satins from Japan. As he passed down the village street he shook hands with the good folk standing at their doors to bid him good—bye, and slowly made his way into the open country.

### VI

The way of the hero is often very hard, and Amyntas felt as if he would choke as he walked slowly along. He looked back at every step, wondering when he would see the old home again. He loitered through the lanes, taking a last farewell of the nooks and corners where he had sat on summer evenings with some fair female friend, and he heartily wished that his name were James or John, and that he were an ordinary farmer’s son who could earn his living without going out for it into the wide, wide world. So may Dick Whittington have meditated as he trudged the London road, but Amyntas had no talismanic cat and no church bells rang him inspiring messages. Besides, Dick Whittington had in him from his birth the makings of a Lord Mayor—he had the golden mediocrity which is the surest harbinger of success. But to Amyntas the world seemed cold and grey, notwithstanding the sunshine of the morning; and the bare branches of the oak trees were gnarled and twisted like the fingers of evil fate. At last he came to the top of a little hill whence one had the last view of the village. He looked at the red—roofed church nestling among the trees, and in front of the inn he could still see the sign of the ’Turk’s Head.’ A sob burst from him; he felt he could not leave it all; it would not be so bad if he could see it once more. He might go back at night and wander through the streets; he could stand outside his own home door and look up at his father’s light, perhaps seeing his father’s shadow bent over his books. He cared nothing that his name was Amyntas; he would go to the neighbouring farmers and offer his services as labourer—the village barber wanted an apprentice. Ah! he would ten times sooner be a village Hampden or a songless Milton than any hero! He hid his face in the grass and cried as if his heart were breaking.

Presently he cried himself to sleep, and when he awoke the sun was high in the heavens and he had the very healthiest of appetites. He repaired to a neighbouring inn and ordered bread and cheese and a pot of beer. Oh, mighty is the power of beer! Why am I not a poet, that I may stand with my hair dishevelled, one hand in my manly bosom and the other outstretched with splendid gesture, to proclaim the excellent beauty of beer? Avaunt! ye sallow teetotalers, ye manufacturers of lemonade, ye cocoa—drinkers! You only see the sodden wretch who hangs about the public—house door in filthy slums, blinking his eyes in the glaze of electric light, shivering in his scanty rags—and you do not know the squalor and the terrible despair of hunger which he strives to forget.... But above all, you do not know the glorious ale of the country, the golden brown ale, with its scent of green hops, its broad scents of the country; its foam is whiter than snow and lighter than the almond blossoms; and it is cold, cold.... Amyntas drank his beer, and he sighed with great content; the sun shone hopefully upon him now, and the birds twittered all sorts of inspiring things; still in his mouth was the delightful bitterness of the hops. He threw off care as a mantle, and he stepped forward with joyful heart. Spain was a wild country, the land of the grave hidalgo and the haughty princess. He felt in his strong right arm the power to fight and kill and conquer. Black—bearded villains should capture beautiful maidens on purpose for him to rescue. Van Tiefel was but a stepping—stone; he was not made for the desk of a counting—house. No heights dazzled him; he saw himself being made a peer or a prince, being granted wide domains by a grateful monarch. He was not too low to aspire to the hand of a king’s fair daughter; he was a hero, every inch a hero. Great is the power of beer. Avaunt! ye sallow teetotalers, ye manufacturers of lemonade, ye cocoa—drinkers!

At night he slept on a haystack, with the blue sky, star—bespangled, for his only roof, and dreamed luxurious dreams.... The mile—stones flew past one another as he strode along, two days, three days, four days. On the fifth, as he reached the summit of a little hill, he saw a great expanse of light shining in the distance, and the sea glittered before him like the bellies of innumerable little silver fishes. He went down the hill, up another, and thence saw Plymouth at his feet; the masts of the ships were like a great forest of leafless trees.... He thanked his stars, for one’s imagination is all very well for a while, and the thought of one’s future prowess certainly shortens the time; but roads are hard and hills are steep, one’s legs grow tired and one’s feet grow sore; and things are not so rose—coloured at the end of a journey as at the beginning. Amyntas could not for ever keep thinking of beautiful princesses and feats of arms, and after the second day he had exhausted every possible adventure; he had raised himself to the highest possible altitudes, and his aristocratic amours had had the most successful outcome.

He sat down by a little stream that ran along the roadside, and bathed his aching feet; he washed his face and hands; starting down the hill, he made his way towards the town and entered the gate.

### VII

Amyntas discovered Captain Thorman of the good ship *Calderon* drinking rum punch in a tavern parlour. In those days all men were heroic.... He gave him the parson’s letter.

‘Well, my boy,’ said the captain, after twice reading it; ‘I don’t mind taking you to Cadiz; I daresay you’ll be able to make yourself useful on board. What can you do?’

‘Please, sir,’ answered Amyntas, with some pride, ‘I know Latin and Greek; I am well acquainted with Horace and Tully; I have read Homer and Aristotle; and added to this, I can read the Bible in the original Hebrew.’

The captain looked at him.

‘If you talk to me like that,’ he said, ‘I’ll shy my glass at your head.’ He shook with rage, and the redness of his nose emitted lightning sparks of indignation; when he had recovered his speech, he asked Amyntas why he stood there like an owl, and told him to get on board.

Amyntas bowed himself meekly out of the room, went down to the harbour, and bearing in mind what he had heard of the extreme wickedness of Plymouth, held tightly on to his money; he had been especially warned against the women who lure the unwary seaman into dark dens and rob him of money and life. But no adventure befell him, thanks chiefly to the swiftness of his heels, for when a young lady of prepossessing appearance came up to him and inquired after his health, affectionately putting her arm in his, he promptly took to his legs and fled.

Amyntas was in luck’s way, for it was not often that an English ship carried merchandise to Spain. As a rule, the two powers were at daggers drawn; but at this period they had just ceased cutting one another’s throats and sinking one another’s ships, joining together in fraternal alliance to cut the throats and sink the ships of a rival power, which, till the treaty, had been a faithful and brotherly ally to His Majesty of Great Britain, and which our gracious king had abandoned with unusual dexterity, just as it was preparing to abandon him....

As Amyntas stood on the deck of the ship and saw the grey cliffs of Albion disappear into the sea, he felt the emotions and sentiments which inevitably come to the patriotic Englishman who leaves his native shore; his melancholy became almost unbearable as the ship, getting out into the open sea, began to roll, and he drank to the dregs the bitter cup of leaving England, home, beauty—and *terra firma*. He went below, and, climbing painfully into his hammock, gave himself over to misery and *mal—de—mer*.

Two days he spent of lamentation and gnashing of teeth, wishing he had never been born, and not till the third day did he come on deck. He was pale and weak, feeling ever so unheroic, but the sky was blue and the ship bounded over the blue waves as if it were alive. Amyntas sniffed in the salt air and the rushing wind, and felt alive again. The days went by, the sun became hotter, and the sky a different, deeper blue, while its vault spread itself over the sea in a vaster expanse. They came in sight of land again; they coasted down a gloomy country with lofty cliffs going sheer into the sea; they passed magnificent galleons laden with gold from America; and one morning, when Amyntas came on deck at break of day, he saw before him the white walls and red roofs of a southern city. The ship slowly entered the harbour of Cadiz.

### VIII

At last! Amyntas went on shore immediately. His spirit was so airy within him that he felt he could hover along in the air, like Mr Lang’s spiritualistic butlers, and it was only by a serious effort of will that he walked soberly down the streets like normal persons. His soul shouted with the joy of living. He took in long breaths as if to breathe in the novelty and the strangeness. He walked along, too excited to look at things, only conscious of a glare of light and colour, a thronging crowd, life and joyousness on every side.... He walked through street after street, almost sobbing with delight, through narrow alleys down which the sun never fell, into big squares hot as ovens and dazzling, up hill and down hill, past ragged slums, past the splendid palaces of the rich, past shops, past taverns. Finally he came on to the shore again and threw himself down in the shade of a little grove of orange trees to sleep.

When he awoke, he saw, standing motionless by his side, a Spanish lady. He looked at her silently, noting her olive skin, her dark and lustrous eyes, the luxuriance of her hair. If she had only possessed a tambourine she would have been the complete realisation of his dreams. He smiled.

‘Why do you lie here alone, sweet youth?’ she asked, with an answering smile. ‘And who and what are you?’

‘I lay down here to rest, lady,’ he replied. ‘I have this day arrived from England, and I am going to Van Tiefel, the merchant.’

‘Ah! a young English merchant. They are all very rich. Are you?’

‘Yes, lady,’ frankly answered Amyntas, pulling out his handful of gold.

The Spaniard smiled on him, and then sighed deeply.

‘Why do you sigh?’ he asked.

‘Ah! you English merchants are so fascinating.’ She took his hand and pressed it. Amyntas was not a forward youth, but he had some experience of English maidens, and felt that there was but one appropriate rejoinder. He kissed her.

She sighed again as she relinquished herself to his embrace.

‘You English merchants are so fascinating—and so rich.’

Amyntas thought the Spanish lady was sent him by the gods, for she took him to her house and gave him melons and grapes, which, being young and of lusty appetite, he devoured with great content. She gave him wine—strong, red, fiery wine, that burned his throat—and she gave him sundry other very delightful things, which it does not seem necessary to relate.

When Amyntas on his departure shyly offered some remuneration for his entertainment, it was with an exquisite southern grace that she relieved him of his ten golden guineas, and he almost felt she was doing him a favour as she carelessly rattled the coins into a silken purse. And if he was a little dismayed to see his treasure go so speedily, he was far too delicate—minded to betray any emotion; but he resolved to lose no time in finding out the offices of the wealthy Tiefel.

### IX

But Van Tiefel was no longer in Cadiz! On the outbreak of the treaty, the Spanish authorities had given the Dutch merchant four—and—twenty hours to leave the country, and had seized his property, making him understand that it was only by a signal mercy that his life was spared. Amyntas rushed down to the harbour in dismay. The good ship *Calderon* had already sailed. Amyntas cursed his luck, he cursed himself; above all, he cursed the lovely Spanish lady whose charms had caused him to delay his search for Van Tiefel till the ship had gone on its eastward journey.

After looking long and wistfully at the sea, he turned back into the town and rambled melancholy through the streets, wondering what would become of him. Soon the pangs of hunger assailed him, and he knew the discomfort of a healthy English appetite. He hadn’t a single farthing, and even Scotch poets, when they come to London to set the Thames on fire, are wont to put a half—crown piece in their pockets. Amyntas meditated upon the folly of extravagance, the indiscretion of youth and the wickedness of woman.... He tightened his belt and walked on. At last, feeling weary and faint with hunger, he lay down on the steps of a church and there spent the night. When he awoke next morning, he soon remembered that he had slept supperless; he was ravenous. Suddenly his eye, looking across the square, caught sight of a book shop, and it occurred to him that he might turn to account the books which his father and the parson had given him. He blessed their foresight. The Bible fetched nothing, but the Aristotle brought him enough to keep him from starvation for a week. Having satisfied his hunger, he set about trying to find work. He went to booksellers and told them his accomplishments, but no one could see any use in a knowledge of Greek, Latin and the Hebrew Bible. He applied at shops. Growing bolder with necessity, he went into merchants’ offices, and to great men’s porters, but all with great civility sent him about his business, and poor Amyntas was no more able to get work than nowadays a professional tramp or the secretary of a trade’s union.

Four days he went on, trying here and trying there, eating figs and melons and bread, drinking water, sleeping beneath archways or on the steps of churches, and he dreamed of the home of roast beef and ale which he had left behind him. Every day he became more disheartened. But at last he rose up against Fate; he cursed it Byronically. Every man’s hand was against him; his hand should be against every man. He would be a brigand! He shook off his feet the dust of Cadiz, and boldly went into the country to find a band of free companions. He stopped herdsmen and pedlars and asked them where brigands were. They pointed to the mountains, and to the mountains he turned his face. He would join the band, provoke a quarrel with the chief, kill him and be made chief in his stead. Then he would scour the country in a velvet mask and a peaked hat with a feather in it, carrying fire and desolation everywhere. A price would be set on his head, but he would snap his fingers in the face of the Prime Minister. He would rule his followers with an iron hand. But now he was in the midst of the mountains, and there were not the smallest signs of lawless folk, not even a gibbet with a skeleton hanging in chains to show where lawless folk had been. He sought high and low, but he never saw a living soul besides a few shepherds clothed in skins. It was most disheartening! Once he saw two men crouching behind a rock, and approached them; but as soon as they saw him they ran away, and although he followed them, shouting that they were not to be afraid since he wanted to be a brigand too, they paid no attention, but only ran the faster, and at last he had to give up the chase for want of breath. One can’t be a robber chief all by oneself, nor is it given to everyone in this world to be a brigand. Amyntas found that even heroes have their limitations.

### X

One day, making his way along a rocky path, he found a swineherd guarding his flock.

‘Good—morrow!’ said the man, and asked Amyntas whither he was bound.

‘God knows!’ answered Amyntas. ‘I am wandering at chance, and know not where I go.’

‘Well, youth, stay the night with me, and to—morrow you can set out again. In return for your company I will give you food and shelter.’

Amyntas accepted gratefully, for he had been feeding on herbs for a week, and the prospect of goat’s milk, cheese and black bread was like the feast of Trimalchion. When Amyntas had said his story, the herdsman told him that there was a rich man in the neighbouring village who wanted a swineherd, and in the morning showed him the way to the rich man’s house.

‘I will come a little way with you lest you take the wrong path.’ ...

They walked along the rocky track, and presently the way divided.

‘This path to the right leads to the village,’ said the man.

‘And this one to the left, swineherd?’

The swineherd crossed himself.

‘Ah! that is the path of evil fortune. It leads to the accursed cavern.’

A cold wind blew across their faces.

‘Come away,’ said the herdsman, shuddering. ‘Do you not feel on your face the cold breath of it?’

‘Tell me what it is,’ said Amyntas. He stood looking at the opening between the low trees.

‘It is a lake of death—a lake beneath the mountain—and the roof of it is held up by marble columns, which were never wrought by the hand of man. Come away! do you not feel on your face the cold breath of it?’

He dragged Amyntas away along the path that led to the village, and when the way was clear before him, turned back, returning to his swine. But Amyntas ran after him.

‘Tell me what they say of the accursed cavern.’

‘They say many things. Some say it is a treasure—house of the Moors, where they have left their wealth. Some say it is an entrance to the enchanted land; some say it is an entrance to hell itself.... Venturous men have gone in to discover the terrible secret, but none has returned to tell it.’

Amyntas wandered slowly towards the village. Were his dreams to end in the herding of swine? What was this cavern of which the herdsman spoke? He felt a strange impulse to go back and look at the dark opening between the little trees from which blew the cold wind.... But perhaps the rich man had a beauteous daughter; history is full of the social successes of swine herds. Amyntas felt a strange thrill as the dark lake came before his mind; he almost heard the lapping of the water.... Kings’ daughters had often looked upon lowly swineherds and raised them to golden thrones. But he could not help going to look again at the dark opening between the little trees. He walked back and again the cold breath blew against his face; he felt in it the icy coldness of the water. It drew him in; he separated the little trees on either side. He walked on as if a hidden power urged him. And now the path became less clear; trees and bushes grew in the way and hindered him, brambles and long creeping plants twisted about his legs and pulled him back. But the wind with its coldness of the black water drew him on.... The birds of the air were hushed, and not one of the thousand insects of the wood uttered a note. Great trees above him hid the light. The silence was ghastly; he felt as if he were the only person in the world.

Suddenly he gave a cry; he had come to the end of the forest, and before him he saw the opening of the cavern. He looked in; he saw black, stagnant water, motionless and heavy, and, as far as the eye could reach, sombre pillars, covered with green, moist slime; they stood half out of the water, supporting the roof, and from the roof oozed moisture which fell in heavy drops, in heavy drops continually. At the entrance was a little skiff with a paddle in it.

Amyntas stood at the edge. Dared he venture? What could there be behind that darkness? The darkness was blacker than the blackest night. He stepped into the boat. Should he go? With beating heart he untied the rope; he hardly dared to breathe. He pushed away.

### XI

He looked to the right and left, paddling slowly; on all sides he saw the slimy columns stretching regularly into the darkness. The light of the open day grew dimmer as he advanced, the air became colder. He looked eagerly around him, paddling slowly. Already he half repented the attempt. The boat went along easily, and the black and heavy water hardly splashed as he drew his paddle through it. Still nothing could be seen but the even ranks of pillars. Then, all at once, the night grew blacker, and again the cold wind arose and blew in his face; everywhere was the ghastly silence and the darkness. A shiver went through him; he could not bear it; in an agony of terror he turned his paddle to go back. Whatever might be the secret of the cavern or the reward of the adventure, he dared go no further. He must get back quickly to the open air and the blue sky. He drew his paddle through the water. The boat did not turn. He gave a cry, he pulled with all his might, the boat only lurched a little and went on its way. He set his teeth and backed; his life depended upon it. The boat swam on. A cold sweat broke out over him; he put all his strength in his stroke. The boat went on into the darkness swiftly and silently. He paused a little to regain force; he stifled a sob of horror and despair. Then he made a last effort; the skiff whirled round into another avenue of columns, and the paddle shivered into atoms against a pillar. The little light of the cavern entrance was lost, and there was utter darkness.

Amyntas cowered down in the boat. He gave up hope of life, and lay there for long hours awaiting his end; the water carried the skiff along swiftly, silently. The darkness was so heavy that the columns were invisible, heavy drops fell into the water from the roof. How long would it last? Would the boat go on till he died, and then speed on for ever? He thought of the others who had gone into the cavern. Were there other boats hurrying eternally along the heavy waters, bearing cold skeletons?

He covered his face with his hands and moaned. But he started up, the night seemed less black; he looked intently; yes, he could distinguish the outlines of the pillars dimly, so dimly that he thought he saw them only in imagination. And soon he could see distinctly their massive shapes against the surrounding darkness. And as gradually the night thinned away into dim twilight, he saw that the columns were different from those at the entrance of the cavern; they were no longer covered with weed and slime, the marble was polished and smooth; and the water beneath him appeared less black. The skiff went on so swiftly that the perpetual sequence of the pillars tired his eyes; but their grim severity gave way to round columns less forbidding and more graceful; as the light grew clearer, there was almost a tinge of blue in the water. Amyntas was filled with wonder, for the columns became lighter and more decorated, surmounted by capitals, adorned with strange sculptures. Some were green and some were red, others were yellow or glistening white; they mirrored themselves in the sapphire water. Gradually the roof raised itself and the columns became more slender; from them sprang lofty arches, gorgeously ornamented, and all was gold and silver and rich colour. The water turned to a dazzling, translucent blue, so that Amyntas could see hundreds of feet down to the bottom, and the bottom was covered with golden sand. And the light grew and grew till it was more brilliant than the clearest day; gradually the skiff slowed down and it swam leisurely towards the light’s source, threading its way beneath the horse—shoe arches among the columns, and these gathered themselves into two lines to form a huge avenue surmounted by a vast span, and at the end, in a splendour of light, Amyntas saw a wondrous palace, with steps leading down to the water. The boat glided towards it and at the steps ceased moving.

### XII

At the same moment the silver doors of the palace were opened, and from them issued black slaves, magnificently apparelled; they descended to Amyntas and with courteous gestures assisted him out of the boat. Then two other slaves, even more splendidly attired than their fellows, came down and led Amyntas slowly and with great state into the court of the palace, at the end of which was a great chamber; into this they motioned the youth to enter. They made him the lowest possible bows and retired, letting a curtain fall over the doorway. But immediately the curtain was raised and other slaves came in, bearing gorgeous robes and all kinds of necessaries for the toilet. With much ceremony they proceeded to bathe and scent the fortunate creature; they polished and dyed his finger nails; they pencilled his eyebrows and faintly darkened his long eyelashes; they put precious balsam on his hair; then they clothed him in silken robes glittering with gold and silver; they put the daintiest red morocco shoes on his feet, a jewelled chain about his neck, rings on his fingers, and in his turban a rich diamond. Finally they placed before him a gigantic mirror, and left him.

Everything had been conducted in complete silence, and Amyntas throughout had preserved the most intense gravity. But when he was alone he gave a little silent laugh of delight. It was obvious that at last he was to be rewarded according to his deserts. He looked at the rings on his fingers, resisting a desire to put one or two of them in his pocket in case of a future rainy day. Then, catching sight of himself in the mirror, he started. Was that really himself? How very delightful! He made sure that no one could see, and then began to make bows to himself in the mirror; he walked up and down the room, observing the stateliness of his gesture; he waved his hands in a lordly and patronising fashion; he turned himself round to look at his back; he was very annoyed that he could not see his profile. He came to the conclusion that he looked every inch a king’s son, and his inner consciousness told him that consequently the king’s daughter could not be far off.

But he would explore his palace! He girded his sword about him; it was a scimitar of beautiful workmanship, and the scabbard was incrusted with precious stones.... From the court he passed into many wonderful rooms, one leading out of the other; there were rich carpets on the marble floors, and fountains played softly in the centre, the walls were inlaid with rare marbles; but he never saw a living soul.

In the last hour Amyntas had become fully alive to his great importance, and carried himself accordingly. He took long, dignified steps, and held one hand on the jewelled hilt of his sword, with his elbows stuck out at right angles to his body; his head was thrown back proudly and his nostrils dilated with appropriate scorn. At last he came to a door closed by a curtain; he raised it. But he started back and was so surprised that he found no words to express his emotions. Four maidens were sitting in the room, more beautiful than he had thought possible in his most extravagant dreams. The gods had evidently not intended Amyntas for single blessedness.... The young persons appeared not to have noticed him. Two of them were seated on rugs playing a languid game of chess, the others were lazily smoking cigarettes.

‘Mate!’ murmured one of the players.

‘Oh!’ sighed the other, yawning, ‘another game finished! That makes five million and twenty—three games against your five million and seventy—nine.’

They all yawned.

But Amyntas felt he must give notice of his presence, and suddenly remembering an expression he had learnt on board ship, he put on a most ferocious look and cried out,—

‘Shiver my timbers!’

The maidens turned towards him with a little cry, but they quickly recovered themselves and one of them came towards him.

‘You speak like a king’s son, oh youth!’ she said.

There was a moment’s hesitation, and the lady, with a smile, added, ‘Oh, ardently expected one, you are a compendium of the seven excellences!’

Then they all began to pay him compliments, each one capping the other’s remark.

‘You have a face like the full moon, oh youth; your eyes are the eyes of the gazelle; your walk is like the gait of the mountain partridge; your chin is as an apple; your cheeks are pomegranates.’

But Amyntas interrupted them.

‘For God’s sake, madam,’ he said, ‘let us have no palavering, and if you love me give me some victuals!...’

Immediately female slaves came in with salvers laden with choice food, and the four maidens plied Amyntas with delicacies. At the end of the repast they sprinkled him with rose—water, and the eldest of them put a crown of roses on his hair. Amyntas thought that after all life was not an empty dream.

### XIII

‘And now, may it please you, oh stranger, to hear our story.

‘Know then that our father was a Moor, one of the wealthiest of his people, and he dwelt with his fellows in Spain, honoured and beloved. Now, when Allah—whose name be exalted!—decreed that our nation should be driven from the country, he, unwilling to leave the land of his birth, built him, with the aid of magic arts, this palace. Here he brought us, his four daughters and all his riches; he peopled it with slaves and filled it with all necessary things, and here we lived in peace and prosperity for many years; but at last a great misfortune befell us, for our father, who was a very learned man and accustomed to busy himself with many abstruse matters, one day got lost in a metaphysical speculation—and has never been found again.’

Here she stopped, and they all sighed deeply.

‘We searched high and low, but in vain, and he has not been found to this day. So we took his will, and having broken the seal, read the following,—"My daughters, I know by my wisdom that the time will come when I shall be lost to you; then you will live alone enjoying the riches and the pleasures which I have put at your disposal; but I foresee that at the end of many years a youth will find his way to this your palace. And though my magic arts have been able to build this paradise for your habitation, though they have endowed you with perpetual youth and loveliness, and, greatest deed of all, have banished hence the dark shadow of Death, yet have they not the power to make four maidens live in happiness and unity with but one man! Therefore, I have given unto each of you certain gifts, and of you four the youth shall choose one to be his love; and to him and her shall belong this palace, and all my riches, and all my power; while the remaining three shall leave everything here to these two, and depart hence for ever."

‘Now, gentle youth, it is with you to choose which of us four you will have remain.’

Amyntas looked at the four damsels standing before him, and his heart beat violently.

‘I,’ resumed the speaker—‘I am the eldest of the four, and it is my right to speak first.’

She stepped forward and stood alone in front of Amyntas; her aspect was most queenly, her features beautiful and clear, her eyes proud and fiery; and masses of raven hair contrasted with the red flaming of her garments. With an imperious gesture she flung back her hair, and spoke thus,—

‘Know, youth, that the gift which my father gave me was the gift of war, and I have the power to make a great warrior of him whose love I am. I will make you a king, youth; you shall command mighty armies, and you shall lead them to battle on a prancing horse; your enemies shall quail before your face, and at last you shall die no sluggard’s death, but pierced by honourable wounds, and the field of battle shall be your deathbed; a nation shall mourn your loss, and your name shall go down famous to after ages.’

‘You are very beautiful,’ said Amyntas, ‘but I am not so eager for warlike exploits as when I wandered through the green lanes of my native land. Let me hear the others.’

A second stepped forward. She was clad most gorgeously of all; a crown of diamonds was on her head, and her robes were of cloth of gold sewn with rubies and emeralds and sapphires.

‘The gift I have to give is wealth, riches—riches innumerable, riches greater than man can dream of. Do you want to be a king, the riches I can give will make you one; do you want armies, riches can procure them; do you want victory, riches can buy it—all these that my sister offers you can I with my riches give you; and more than that, for everything in the world can be got with riches, and you shall be all—powerful. Take me to be your love and I will make you the Lord of Gold.’

Amyntas smiled.

‘You forget, lady, that I am but twenty.’

The third stepped forward. She was beautiful and pale and thoughtful. Her hair was yellow, like corn when the sun is shining on it; and her dress was green, like the young grass of the spring. She spoke without the animation of the others, mournfully rather than proudly, and she looked at Amyntas with melancholy eyes.

‘I am the Lady of Art; all that is beautiful and good and wise is in my province. Live with me; I will make you a poet, and you shall sing beautiful songs. You shall be wise; and in perfect wisdom, oh youth! is perfect happiness.’

‘The poet has said that wisdom is weariness, oh lady!’ said Amyntas. ‘My father is a poet; he has written ten thousand Latin hexameters, and a large number of Greek iambics.’ ...

Then came forward the last. As she stood before Amyntas a cry burst from him; he had never in his life seen anyone so ravishingly beautiful. She was looking down, and her long eyelashes prevented her eyes from being seen, but her lips were like a perfect rose, and her skin was like a peach; her hair fell to her waist in great masses of curls, and their sparkling auburn, many—hued and indescribable, changed in the sunbeams from richest brown to gold, tinged with deep red. She wore a simple tunic of thin silk, clasped at her waist with a jewelled belt of gold.

She stood before Amyntas, letting him gaze; then suddenly she lifted her eyes to his. Amyntas’s heart gave a mighty beat against his chest. Her eyes, her eyes were the very lights of love, carrying passionate kisses on their beams. A sob of ecstasy choked the youth, and he felt that he could kneel down and worship before them.

Slowly her lips broke into a smile, and her voice was soft and low.

‘I am the Lady of Love,’ she said. ‘Look!’ She raised her arms, and the thin, loose sleeves falling back displayed their roundness and exquisite shape; she lifted her head, and Amyntas thrilled to cover her neck with kisses. At last she loosened her girdle, and when the silken tunic fell to her feet she stood before him in perfect loveliness.

‘I cannot give you fame, or riches, or wisdom; I can only give you Love, Love, Love.... Oh, what an eternity of delight shall we enjoy in one another’s arms! Come, my beloved, come!’

‘Yes, I come, my darling!’ Amyntas stepped forward with outstretched arms, and took her hands in his. ‘I take you for my love; I want not wealth nor great renown, but only you. You will give me love—alluring kisses, and we will live in never—ending bliss.’

He drew her to him, and, with his arms around her, pressed back her head and covered her lips with kisses.

### XIV

And while Amyntas lost his soul in the eyes of his beloved, the three sisters went sadly away. They ascended the stately barge which awaited them, and the water bore them down the long avenue of columns into the darkness. After a long time they reached the entrance of the cavern, and having placed a great stone against it, that none might enter more, they separated, wandering in different directions.

The Lady of War passed through Spain, finding none there worthy of her. She crossed the mountains, and presently she fell in love with a little artillery officer, and raised him to dignity and power; and together they ran through the lands, wasting and burning, making women widows and children orphans, ruthless, unsparing, caring for naught but the voluptuousness of blood. But she sickened of the man at last and left him; then the blood he had spilt rose up against him, and he was cast down and died an exile on a lonely isle. And now they say she dwells in the palaces of a youth with a withered hand; together they rule a mighty empire, and their people cry out at the oppression, but the ruler heeds nothing but the burning kisses of his love.

The Lady of Riches, too, passed out of Spain. But she was not content with one love, nor with a hundred. She gave her favours to the first comer, and everyone was welcome; she wandered carelessly through the world, but chiefly she loved an island in the north; and in its capital she has her palace, and the inhabitants of the isle have given themselves over, body and soul, to her domination; they pander and lie and cheat, and forswear themselves; to gain her smile they will shrink from no base deed, no meanness; and she, too, makes women widows and children orphans.... But her subjects care not; they are fat and well—content; the goddess smiles on them, and they are the richest in the world.

The Lady of Art has not found an emperor nor a mighty people to be her lovers. She wanders lonely through the world; now and then a youthful dreamer sees her in his sleep and devotes his life to her pursuit; but the way is hard, very hard; so he turns aside to worship at the throne of her sister of Riches, and she repays him for the neglect he has suffered; she showers gold upon him and makes him one of her knights. But sometimes the youth remains faithful, and goes through his life in the endless search; and at last, when his end has come, she comes down to the garret in which he lies cold and dead, and stooping down, kisses him gently—and lo! he is immortal.

But as for Amyntas, when the sisters had retired, he again took his bride in his arms, and covered her lips with kisses; and she, putting her arms round his neck, said with a smile,—

‘I have waited for you so long, my love, so long!’

And here it is fit that we should follow the example of the three sisters, and retire also.

The moral of this story is, that if your godfathers and godmothers at your baptism give you a pretty name, you will probably marry the most beautiful woman in the world and live happily ever afterwards.... And the platitudinous philosopher may marvel at the tremendous effects of the most insignificant causes, for if Amyntas had been called Peter or John, as his mother wished, William II. might be eating sauerkraut as peacefully as his ancestors, the Lord Mayor of London might not drive about in a gilded carriage, and possibly even—Mr Alfred Austin might not be Poet Laureate....