

# *Melancholia*



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Dramatization of Rudyard Kipling's first novel "*The Light that Failed*",

by Christian Lanciai (2016, translated 2018)

## *Dramatis Personae:*

Torpenhow, journalist  
Dick Helder, artist  
A doctor  
A nurse  
Madame Binat  
George  
Maisie  
Four art critics  
Bessie  
Breton, Dick's assistant  
A slut

The action is in east north Africa and in London around 1890.

Act I scene 1. Sudan. The war in full action.

*Torpenhow* What are you doing here, really? You are not a war maniac like the others, are you?

*Dick* Believe it or not, but I am here for the same reason as you.

*Torp.* Are you working for some paper?

*Dick* No, I only work for art.

*Torp.* And what has art to do with war?

*Dick* Realism! This is where you find it! Bleeding soldiers! Dramatic massacres! Amputations and damaged faces! The closeness of death! Reality is never more gratifying to catch as in the clutches of death!

*Torp.* You talk like a vulture.

*Dick* And you? Aren't you wallowing in your war documentaries? What are you living for if not for your journalism?

*Torp.* It's my job. I run my job. I write for my paper to inform the public about what is going on and how it is turning out.

*Dick* But you get paid for it. You are at least prostituted.

Torp. You have to make a living. Also prostitution is a livelihood.  
 Dick But I am an idealist. That's the difference.  
 Torp. Let me see. (*Torp. studies some of Dick's sketches.*) They are awfully good. They are alive. You have a knack of catching life in its fullest moment.  
 Dick That's the intention.  
 Torp. Old boy, you could make money on this.  
 Dick That's another issue.  
 Torp. I could help you. At home in London I could help you to some exhibition.  
 Dick When the war is over? This war will never end. A world power like us lives on keeping the wars going.  
 Torp. Sudan is only a chapter. It will soon be over.  
 Dick We'll see. I will be too busy here even if we are sent home.  
 Torp. You are possessed by art.  
 Dick Yes, I am.  
 Torp. So much that you risk your life just to catch the last fleeting moments of a dying soldier.  
 Dick It's poetry.  
 Torp. No, my friend, it's only love of life, and for that you are worth all the back-up you can get.  
 Dick I am happy as long as I may work in peace.  
 (*Torp. claps his shoulder and returns out to battle, while Dick continues drawing sketches with passionate interest.*)

Scene 2. A field hospital.

Doctor He shouldn't have come here at all.  
 Nurse But he will survive?  
 Doctor Was it worth it? To risk life at the hottest fields of battle just to sketch pornographies of violence?  
 Nurse It was his choice. At the same time he served his country.  
 Doctor Waging his life. He could have ended up one of too many invalids.  
 Nurse He seems happy anyway.  
 Doctor There is never any limit to the recklessness of human stupidity.  
 (*Dick is rolled in with his face bandaged.*)  
 My compliments and congratulations to your almost succeeding in killing yourself.  
 Dick It wasn't me.  
 Doctor But you risked your life for nothing and almost lost it.  
 Dick I am sorry if I have disappointed you.  
 Doctor You survived only by sheer luck. That saber cut could have cost you your eyesight.  
 Dick There is too much left for me to sketch and paint.

*Doctor* All I can say is: Don't do it again!  
*Dick* Don't worry, doctor. I have seen what I have seen and have collected enough stuff for many interesting pieces. I will only stick to painting for the rest of my life.  
*Doctor* That sounds reassuring. But take it easy. Don't overstrain your delicate eyes. You will have to spare them from now on.  
*Dick* What else would I use? As long as I can see I intend to work on painting.  
*Doctor* Get him out of here! (*Dick is rolled out.*) He isn't aware of how lucky he was. One bit of an inch deeper, and he would have been blind if not dead.  
*Nurse* He seems to manage all right.  
*Doctor* For the time being.

Scene 3. Port Said. Madame Binat's merry establishment.

Vivid life, various customers among fezes and bedouins, Brits, soldiers and light ladies, all more or less drunk, pianola music and cheerful atmosphere.

*Dick (breaking in)* Champagne! Champagne!  
*Madame* What's the story, Dick? Are you drunk?  
*Dick* Not quite enough yet. It's my friend Torpenhow, who has written to me from London! He has launched my career!  
*George (takes his letter and reads)* "Come home at once! You are a success!"  
*Dick* He said he would do what he could for me. Now he has almost fixed an exhibition!  
*George* For your bloody gory pictures?  
*Dick* No, for living realism! It can be made more alive in art than in reality!  
*George* Reality is not always appealing. You beautify and glorify war.  
*Dick* No, it's about dramatization! I catch the most dramatic momentums of reality and eternalize them! Or else they would just vanish.  
*Madame* Congratulations to your success, soldier!  
*Dick* Never a soldier again! From now on an artist only!  
*Madame* That sounds good.  
*George* So we shall not see you here any more.  
*Dick* Not after my farewell party! Champagne! Champagne to everyone! It's all on me! (*climbs a table with bottle and glass, invites as many as he can, the general mood couldn't be more cheerful.*)

Act II scene 1. London. A well furnished artist's study.

*Torp. (opens the door and enters Dick)* It's all yours, Dick. Are you satisfied?  
*Dick* Torp, old boy, I am overwhelmed. Did I really deserve this?  
*Torp.* Not yet, but we know you will.

Dick           It's only because of you things have gone so well for me.

Torp.           It's because of your art and its truth and pathos. You are an honest artist, Dick, and no amateur. That's the secret.

Dick           Now I can start working.

Torp.           That's the intention. We have no demands, but we have expectations.

Dick           The platform you give me in life will be my spring-board.

Torp.           And you can see Maisie again. You are colleagues, you know.

Dick           I know. We studied together in France for the same teacher, but even if I love her we should not join our lives.

Torp.           Why not?

Dick           Artists shouldn't marry each other. Learn from van Gogh and Gaughin. They almost ended up killing each other.

Torp.           Yes, it's a wild profession with a certain risk of exaggerations.

Dick           We only live for exaggerations. That's what gives that little extra making life worth living. (*a delicate knock*)

Torp. (*loud*)   Come in!

Maisie (*entering coyly*) I heard that you had moved in, Dick. I was only curious about how you were getting along.

Dick           Come in, Maisie! You make our first guest of honour!

Maisie          'Our'?

Dick           Torp lives next door. He organized the studio.

Torp.           We saved each other's lives in Sudan, Maisie. I interefered with a jihadist when he tried to cut off Dick's head, and Dick shot down my potential murderer.

Dick           If someone saves the life of another, he is responsible for that person's life as long as he lives. We both happened to that obligation.

Maisie          And that's why Torp is helping you to success and income.

Dick           The only thing I ever feared in life was poverty, which indeed I had enough of already. Now that threat against my life is over and done with.

Maisie          While Torp and his syndicate are making profits of your work.

Dick           They are welcome to, as long as I am allowed to work. It's just a fair exchange, and I am kept afloat and don't have to freeze or starve.

Torp.           How is *your* art going, Maisie?

Maisie          I am never satisfied, but you never should be.

Dick           That's how it is. If you can't improve any longer you might as well quit.

Torp.           The hard conditions of art.

Dick           Art takes everything. If you don't give it everything you are nothing.

Maisie          I prefer humbly serving it.

Torp.           You are contraries in inclination. Dick wants to go to extremes in everything, while you, Maisie, only wants to serve.

Maisie          And love.

Dick           Isn't it about time for some house-warming drink? (*pours out three glasses of champagne*) For the three of us, for Maisie's inspiration, Torp's promotion, and to art!

Torp.           To the art of both of you!

*Maisie* To *your* art, Dick!  
*Dick* To work! (*They drink heartily together.*)

Scene 2. At the opening of the exhibition: the art critics.

1 There is energy in his art, but doesn't he paint the same subject all the time?  
2 That's exactly my opinion.  
3 It's perfectly virtuous and psychologically poignant portraits of soldiers but at the same time a constant wallowing in blood and mutilated bodies, violence and one-sided exaggerated morbidity.  
4 Can he paint anything else?  
2 Good question.  
3 There is his sponsor. Let's ask him.  
4 My good sir, we were just wondering if Dick Helder could paint anything else than battle and violence, blood and dying soldiers?  
*Torp.* That you will have to ask him. Here he is now.  
*Dick* What's the issue?  
*Torp.* They wonder if you can paint anything else than bloodsheds and atrocities of war.  
*Dick* They should know by now, that I paint what I am supposed and asked to paint, and as long as it gives money I have no reason to desist.  
1 So you only paint for money?  
*Dick* I paint for my livelihood. No one wants to be poor.  
3 (*to the others*) He seems to be at peace with his prostitution of violence.  
*Dick* Isn't life in itself a prostitution? Who doesn't sell his life and his freedom for the security of money? Who doesn't sacrifice his integrity for that comfort? What is capitalism, which rules the world, other than prostitution?  
4 Are you then a communist?  
*Dick* No, I refuse to have anything to do with politics. I am no more than just a painter, and as such I am only interested in realism.  
3 Why then do you one-sidedly dedicate your interest to only the brutal sides of life?  
2 Good question.  
*Dick* What do you lack in my exposition? Thrill? Drama? Lovely maidens? Idyllic landscapes? Others paint that kind of stuff well enough. I don't have to join them. I stick to my own style, which is the drama of life at the hands of death. If you don't find anything lacking in my realism, you have nothing to complain of.  
1 He is right.  
4 Come, gentlemen. We had our questions answered. (*The four art critics disperse.*)  
*Torp.* They got what they asked for.  
*Dick* But they are right, *Torp.* There is something missing. I never painted a real woman.

*Torp.* You could practise on Maisie.  
*Dick* No, she is too normal and conventional. I need a female counterpart to the hopeless realism on the battlefield.  
*Torp.* Search and you shall find.  
*Dick* I will find her sooner or later.  
*Torp.* What about Maisie's red-haired roommate?  
*Dick* Who made me jealous of Maisie? I can't see why she is keeping her.  
*Torp.* Here is Maisie herself.  
*Maisie (entering)* Congratulations to your success, Dick!  
*Dick* Thank you, but it's no success.  
*Maisie* Why not? You are now established, you make profits, and all you need is to carry on the same style with shocking war scenes and sudden violent deaths.  
*Dick* That's just the problem. The success has filled my art with superficial emptiness.  
*Maisie* But you desired the success.  
*Dick* I needed it to get rid of my ghosts.  
*Maisie* And do you now prefer your ghosts?  
*Dick* It was my fear of poverty. I never wanted to starve or find myself a beggar out in the street without somewhere to sleep. But now I see that it was hardship that brought forth my best art.  
*Maisie* That's always how it is. Perhaps you could get something out of my new model.  
*Dick* What about her?  
*Maisie* She comes directly from the street, gutter realism, all the miseries of life, no make-up, no make-believe, just the plain hard truth of life.  
*Dick* That's perhaps just what I need to get on.  
*Maisie* I could imagine so. *Torp* knows her.  
*Torp.* Do you mean Bessie?  
*Maisie* Who else?  
*Dick* You haven't told me about her.  
*Torp.* A load of misery, nothing for an artist, a fallen woman and completely unpredictable but honest in her way. And she's got a temper.  
*Dick* Could she sit for a model?  
*Maisie* If you pay her.  
*Torp.* She is at my place now licking her wounds. You could meet her there.  
*Dick* Did she come to stay?  
*Torp.* You're joking.  
*Dick* Come, Maisie, it's time for us to get a drink or something, and you will tell me more about your discovery.  
*Maisie* The less said about her, the better.  
*Dick* Then she really interests me.  
*Torp.* You must not be mad at me, Dick, but she was in a terrible state, and I gave her your food.

*Dick* What had she been up to? Walking the streets as a hooker? Getting into trouble? Fighting at the pub?

*Torp.* No, she is just a discarded serving maid who has seen better days.

*Dick* We have all seen better days. What made you take care of her?

*Maisie* Ordinary human decency.

*Dick* That's risky. Such people could ruin you. They can set your home on fire by smoking in bed, they can bring lethal infections, and worst of all, you could never get rid of them.

*Torp.* I think you would find her head interesting.

Act III scene 1. Torp's apartment.

Bessie on an open couch sleeping. Torp and Dick enter discreetly.

*Torp.* Don't disturb her. She is asleep.

*Dick* She isn't exactly any beauty.

*Torp.* She never tried or pretended to be.

*Dick* She would have been of no interest whatsoever if she wasn't marked by her experience.

*Torp.* She is tough. I promise you that. She has learned a thing or two.

*Dick* I believe you. All the laws of the gutter. The rules of the slum. All the tricks of a fallen woman to survive.

*Torp.* You have no right to abuse a fallen woman.

*Dick* I don't. I just evaluate her.

*Bessie (wakes up, to Torp.)* What kind of dirty creep is that you brought in from the street?

*Torp.* It's my friend and war companion, Dick Heldar. He is only a painter.

*Bessie* Tell that to someone else. He eyes me like a coroner.

*Dick* You will do.

*Bessie* What will I do, you impertinent pimp?

*Dick* Your eyes save you. You are alive.

*Bessie* Imagine that in spite of people like you. *(to Torp.)* Why the hell would you bring a pimp in here for?

*Dick* I am no pimp. I just want to paint you. You will get a pund for every sitting. You only have to sit three times a week.

*Bessie* What kind of sitting do you mean? I am only doing sittings on the toilet.

*Torp.* He means no harm, Bessie. He only wants to paint your portrait. That's all. You have nothing to fear of him.

*Bessie* And if he beats me?

*Dick* I assure you, I have never beaten a woman and will never do so. I only beat enemies at war, like also Torp here, and we have both left all wars behind.

*Bessie* So you are that kind of war heroes who brag about having butchered as many people as possible.



*Dick* Not any more.

*Bessie* Say that again. You are both professional murderers who excuse your mass murders by referring them to the interest of the nation and you only obeyed orders.

*Torp.* War is war, Bessie. Either you obey orders and massacre the enemy or you get massacred.

*Bessie* But didn't you volunteer to your so called war service?

*Torp.* Our country needed us.

*Bessie (laughing hard and scornfully)* Ha! It needed its hired killers to develop its ruthless imperialism! And you let yourselves on to it! You made them turn you into assassins since you allowed yourselves to be seduced! You soldiers are worse than prostitutes!

*Dick* She is right.

*Bessie* So what? You have left your careers as professional killers behind, and nothing can undo your massacres or free you from your guilt. How did it really feel to pierce the guts and hearts of your victims and turn them into fountains of blood? How did it feel to cut off their heads alive? How did your stomachs react afterwards as you were left standing by a battlefield of only rotting dying bloody corpses? How did it feel to be butchers of living people?

*Dick* I want to paint you, Bessie. Are you willing?

*Bessie* Do you promise not to beat me?

*Dick* I promise.

*Bessie* And you will really pay just for sitting?

*Dick* Generously.

*Bessie* I have no job, so I have no choice.

*Dick* That's the spirit.

*Torp.* Congratulations, Bessie. You have a decent job.

*Bessie* I wonder. That remains to be seen. It doesn't feel very honest to get paid just for sitting, keeping still and posing.

*Dick* You don't even have to pose. You just need to be yourself.

*Bessie* And do you really think you could canvas me as who I am when I don't know myself who I am?

*Dick* Then it's time you had an identity.

*Bessie* Will you plaster me with that?

*Dick* No, but my portrait of you will give you a character that will last.

*Bessie* It will not work. I have no character.

*Dick* Shall we bet?

*Torp.* I wage that Dick could succeed. Do you dare to claim the opposite, Bessie?

*Bessie* What do I get if I win?

*Torp.* You can't win, but you will get paid the double if you lose.

*Bessie* Then I accept. It's after all you who take the risks.

*Dick* I never hesitated to take a risk.

*Bessie* We'll see. When shall I begin?

*Dick* At once! Come across to my place, and we will get started!

*Bessie* Do I get paid at once?  
*Dick* Of course.  
*Bessie* Let's go for it then. See you later, Torp.  
*Torp.* Good luck, both of you. (*Dick and Bessie leave.*)

He has found his perfect model. If he succeeds in capturing her challenging scorn against the whole world on his canvas, he will have a picture for all times. But he knows his business. He is a realist, and all he has to do is to render her justice.

### Scene 3. A café.

Maisie at a table with a cup of tea as Torp enters.

*Maisie* Welcome, Torp.  
*Torp.* Did you know what you did when you sent her to me?  
*Maisie* I guessed it.  
*Torp.* No man in the world would fall for such a woman, and only an artist like Dick would take her up as a model.  
*Maisie* That's what I thought. He has a fallacy for the extreme.  
*Torp.* He really imagines himself capable of doing something unique of the painting and indulges his soul in it. How did you find her?  
*Maisie* It was my room mate who asked for some advice. "What shall we do with her? She has no job and is indifferent to everything and would gladly disappear into the river." "Then we must help her," I said.  
*Torp.* And she made an impression on you?  
*Maisie* I saw at once that I could never paint her. Only a man could do that, but since her face and its tale should be taken care of before it became too late, I sent her to you.  
*Torp.* Her tale? Do you know anything about it?  
*Maisie* It's evident. She has been through everything. She probably has several suicide attempts behind her. They usually have. She can't cry any longer since she has cried too much too early. All she can do is to laugh and that with a hysterical scorn to mock all life.  
*Torp.* That's what she does. That's what Dick wants to paint.  
*Maisie* Yes, he could do it. He loved all excesses in love and war and has the right possession of an artist. I just hope he will not cross the border.  
*Torp.* Of what?  
*Maisie* Any border to the abnormal. He wouldn't hesitate to overstrain himself. He has had his drinking periods and could indulge in a new one at any moment. He loves to wallow in all human misery, and that's why Bessie is like made just for him.  
*Torp.* It could really be a portrait for all times then.  
*Maisie* I am sure it will. Did you order tea?  
*Torp.* Not yet. (*calls a waiter and orders tea*)  
*Maisie* It's good that you live so close to him so that you can keep an eye on him.

Torp. Are you worried about him?

Maisie Of course. We are childhood friends and vowed fidelity to each other already as children, which none of us ever broke.

Torp. And why did you never go through with it?

Maisie Because both of us turned into artists and none wanted to impede the other's progress. He can only disdain my art, while his passionate realism frightens me.

Torp. Why?

Maisie He is too hard on himself. Did he ever complain to you about his eyes?

Torp. No.

Maisie As children we played with guns and fired them at the waves of the sea, but one shot was fired by mistake. It backfired, and Dick got all the powder in his eyes and couldn't see anything for several days. He has complained about his sight being dimmed sometimes, and he was always afraid not to have time enough to paint everything he wanted.

Torp. He wants to paint all the world.

Maisie And he has found it in the deepest fallen woman in London.

Torp. An interesting experiment.

Maisie It could be his life's masterpiece. I would gladly grant him that accomplishment.

Torp. It seems to come out for certain. It seems inevitable.

Maisie How does she manage as a model?

Torp. They quarrel all the time. He provokes her all the time by indulging in scornful abuse and denigration of her while at the same time he does anything to make her laugh.

Maisie That sounds strenuous.

Torp. She can't stand it and only endures it for the money.

Maisie An eccentric model.

Torp. He couldn't have found a worse one, but he loves it.

Maisie Let him love it as long as it lasts.

Torp. The portrait should be finished soon. What will he do then?

Maisie The constant painful question to any artist, which no one wants to answer or even think of as long as there is still some work to do.

Torp. Let's go and visit him and see how far he has come.  
*(He politely helps her to her feet and takes her arm as they go out.)*

### Scen 3. Dick's studio.

*Dick (by the easel)* Laugh, Bessie, laugh!

Bessie Who the hell do you think you are? Do you think anyone could laugh by command?

Dick No one can laugh like you! All the world's perdition is in your laughing scorn!

*Bessie* As if I didn't know it. You'll have to say something funny first.

*Dick* No, it's only you who are really funny around here. Say something funny about the German emperor.

*Bessie* That ridiculous monster! If anyone isn't funny in the world, it's him!

*Dick* Say something about his mustachios or his shrunken arm!

*Bessie* He is a peacock without feathers who thinks he's got feathers. He is the very personification of the emperor without clothes.

*Dick* Perfect! Bang on! Say something about our queen Victoria!

*Bessie* That old bitch! The less said about her, the better.

*Dick* Should we turn into a republic?

*Bessie* The sooner, the better, but we'll never do it anyway.

*Dick* Say something about the czar and the Russian empire!

*Bessie* The fact that they are related with the British royal family says all about them, and there's the haemophilia. There is no hope for any royal family in Europe. They are all equally degenerate and incompetent chickens.

*Dick* What about the British empire? Is there no good at all in the world?

*Bessie* Certainly not, and that least of all. We are all doomed and especially all colonial powers and empires. We only make ourselves impossible and unbearable by our intolerable superiority.

*Dick* But didn't Goethe say, that any order would be better than no order, and that order is more important than justice?

*Bessie* Naturally there can be no justice without order, but with order also comes injustice.

*Dick* You are phenomenal, Bessie. You put the whole world to scorn.

*Bessie* As if it wasn't absurd enough already.

*Port. (enters)* How is your work going, Dick?

*Bessie (to Dick)* Why the hell didn't you let me stay with him? He helped me and was good to me, but you are just a bloody slave-driver.

*Dick* No, an artist, and you get paid for your voluntary work.

*Bessie* Voluntary? What the hell? You force me to it!

*Dick* Not by force.

*Bessie* That's all that's missing. Every second I spend sitting here I want to batter you to death, but all the time I am afraid you will kill me first.

*Dick* Listen, Bessie, this is an ideal work, and you help me in the creative process, which you get paid for. You have nothing to complain of. Cheer up.

*Bessie* That's how he keeps on all the time, teaching me about the holy business of his art, as if it was something grand and imperishable, while he only plays around making a fool of himself and forcing me into chronic cramps of stiffness. I mustn't stop grinning, for then he is on me at once, so the risk is the grin stiffens like on some bloody laughing man making my grinning skull to shine through my skin.

*Dick* That's what it does! Let it grin even more outrageously! Laugh and be happy! Let your mad joyfulness laugh the whole world to scorn!

*Bessie* That's what it does, you daubing clown! (to *Port.*) Shouldn't someone like him be locked up permanently for his own good and for everyone's safety?

*Port.* Wait until your portrait is ready.

*Bessie* He wants to drive me as mad as he is himself, and my portrait of the total malicious pleasure will only be his own self-portrait.

*Dick* But it will be good! It will be alive! And it will be you! No one will see anyone else than yourself and your justified scorn of the world! You will be eternalized!

*Bessie* As a death skull.

*Dick* No, as who you really are and your better self! You stand above the world and are better than all those who abuse it!

*Bessie* That's how I became what I am for its abuse as it only abused me. I wish I could pay it all back with interest.

*Dick* Your portrait will be your return of payment!

*Bessie* With sincerest thanks for your deliverance of all that abuse!

*Torp.* Does he pay you roundly?

*Bessie* Always only afterwards, when he is almost satisfied with the day's work. He forces me to keep going around the well like a donkey tantalized by a carrot that he always keeps out of reach.

*Dick* When the portrait is finished you shall have fifty pounds.

*Bessie* That's how he keeps going on. It's just that the portrait is never finished, for it never gets bad enough, for that mad artist always keeps finding new ways of making it even worse.

*Torp.* You are not sober, Dick.

*Dick* I know.

*Bessie* He keeps drinking but gives nothing to me. He claims it keeps him on his feet.

*Port.* How long has he been going on?

*Bessie* Since he started. He sees things clearer when his eyes are swimming.

*Port.* Dick, how do you think you could ever finish the portrait if you keep drinking all the time?

*Dick* That's my only chance.

*Port.* How so?

*Dick* My sight is getting worse.

*Port.* No wonder. You constantly overstrain yourself and force yourself to work in insufficient light. Rest your eyes, and you will see better.

*Dick* No, then the sight goes.

*Port.* What do you mean?

*Dick* My only chance is to keep going. (*shields suddenly his eyes with his hand*)

*Port.* What's the matter?

*Dick* It will pass.

*Bessie* He gets those attacks all the time and more frequently.

*Port.* Have you been to see an oculist?

Dick Yes. (*sits down heavily*) That's all for today, Bessie. You can go home. Port, give her a sovereign.

Port. (*gives her a coin, and she packs her things immediately, happy to get away.*)

What did he say?

Dick Six months at best.

Port. Six months of what?

Dick I can't expect to keep my sight in more than six months at best.

Port. (*shocked at first*) But Dick, that's terrible! Is that why you try to work yourself to death?

Dick Yes.

Port. (*doesn't know what to say, tries to collect himself*) Your picture is a masterpiece. It's obvious already.

Dick I know.

Port. If you manage to complete it even if it's your last work, you will have a place in art history.

Dick I know. That's why I want to get it finished.

Torp. You'll have time. All you need is to take it easy.

Dick No, that's the least thing I must do. Then it will never get finished.

Torp. (*pours a drink to both himself and Dick*) Cheers, old boy.

Dick Keep me supplied with whisky, so that I can keep going, and I might even continue painting in blindness.

Torp. Cheers to that. (*They drink.*)

#### Scene 4. The café.

Maisie (*sits by a cup of tea as Torp. arrives*) How is it with him?

Torp. He stakes everything on the portrait, his life, his soul and his sight.

Maisie Has he problems with his eyes?

Torp. Not yet, but he drinks too much.

Maisie He is passionate. He always was.

Torp. Especially as a painter. Why won't you visit him?

Maisie I am afraid of what he is up to. If he gets the portrait finished I will gladly take part of it, but while he is still at it I don't want to disturb him.

Torp. Is it because you are a woman?

Maisie I don't want to get between him and his model.

Torp. She is in plain terms just a piece of social realism.

Maisie But still a woman. Every woman possesses inextinguishable and unfathomable resources.

Torp. She just wants to get away from there. As soon as he has the portrait completed she will disappear.

Maisie I am not so sure of that. The portrait will still be there.

Torp. He invests an eternity into it which you can't find a trace of in her.

*Maisie* Do you really think she only does it for the money?  
*Torp.* Yes. Why else would she do it?  
*Maisie* Perhaps for some hope of some good will in him for her.  
*Torp.* If she does it's in vain. He didn't even want to let her stay with me.  
*Maisie* Why not?  
*Torp.* Search me. I never understood it myself.  
*Maisie* I wonder what the sum will be of this portrait of the century.  
*Torp.* It will be a sensation. I promise you that.  
*Maisie (ironically)* Like Mona Lisa?  
*Torp.* More than that. Mona Lisa is unreal and only smiles. Bessie is reality itself and laughs all reality to cinders.  
*Maisie* Is that what the picture is? Just one big laugh?  
*Port.* Importing all the world's bitterness and disappointment. The picture is a mockery of all human effort. It's not even black humour. It's the eternal grinning scorn of death in a live condition and consummate realism of a living woman.  
*Maisie* The picture frightens me already.  
*Port.* Just wait until it's finished.  
*Maisie* Something tells me it will never get finished.  
*Port.* We shall see. (*They have their tea.*)

Scene 5. The studio.

*Dick* Laugh more, Bessie! Laugh more!  
*Bessie* I can't laugh any more!  
*Dick* You must!  
*Bessie* You are drunk!  
*Dick* I know. That's why you must laugh even more, at me, if you can't find anything else to laugh at.  
*Bessie* Don't you think I'm trying? But you are more grotesque than funny.  
*Dick* That's right! Abuse me! Scorn me! Kill me! Annihilate me!  
*Bessie* It doesn't help. You'll never get funny anyway.  
*Dick* I am not the one who is supposed to be funny. It's our entire absurd reality, which you righteously are to annihilate with your scorn!  
*Bessie* Say something funny for a change.  
*Dick* No, all the fun is only you.  
*Bessie* It's not funny to be a slave-worker for a pathetic lunatic who only drinks.  
*Dick* I drink to live! I drink to paint!  
*Bessie* How can you paint when you only see me more dimly and only get more wobbly and slurry?  
*Dick* Come and look! Watch your own mirror image, a thousand times more striking in reality than in your own mirror! I have captured your super ego!  
*Bessie (comes down to look at the portrait)* Good golly! Is that supposed to be me?

Dick           Who else?

Bessie         I was never that merry.

Dick           There you see! I transcended your self!

Bessie         And I was never that bitter.

Dick           You never dared to be as bitter as you really are.

Bessie         I never complained. I went through the crabs a number of times, I was raped occasionally, I was almost murdered several times, but I never complained.

Dick           That's just it! You never complained! You are alive! You are intact with all your breakneck experiences and just laugh at your tragedies! That's the very thing!

Bessie         You see the fun in it. I don't.

Dick           All we need is the final touch, and the portrait is finished. Just sit still five minutes more, please!

Bessie (*resumes her position*) And then five minutes more. And then another half hour. And then five hours more. God damn it how I long for the end of this misery!

Dick           Just a little patience! I promise! (*covers his eyes*) Don't fail me now, frail light of my eyes, when I am almost there!

Bessie         You are finished.

Dick           No, I have only just begun! I will paint all the world's splendid misery! I will paint every beggar in East End! I will paint every invalid on crutches! I will paint death itself and make his ultimate grin of scorn alive in the most down to earth and attractive woman in the world!

Bessie         You are more hysterical than any woman.

Dick           No, I am an artist! There! It's finished! (*triumphantly*) Thank you, Bessie! You have helped me accomplish my masterpiece! Behold the result! It will be the triumph of the salon this year!

Bessie (*coming down studying the portrait*) Is it really finished?

Dick           Yes, it's finally finished! I refuse to overwork it!

Bessie         So what will you do now?

Dick           What do you think? I haven't had a single full night of rest in two weeks! I only lived for the portrait. Isn't it remarkable?

Bessie         You are deranged.

Dick           On purpose! Drink and be happy! You don't have to come here any more! At last you will get handsomely paid! (*brings out his wallet*)

Bessie         You don't want me for a model any more?

Dick           All you wanted was to get rid of me! Aren't you happy now when it is over?

Bessie         I don't know.

Dick           Here you are. (*gives her a large note*) If you want more, just let me know.

Bessie         Fifty pounds.

Dick           Aren't you satisfied?

Bessie         It's more than I ever earned before.

Dick           Do you want more?

Bessie         It almost feels indecent. All I did was to sit for you. You never asked for anything of myself.



Dick            You are most welcome! I love you anyway.  
Bessie         Me or the portrait?  
Dick            The one you are in the portrait.  
Bessie         Go to blazes and drop dead.  
Dick            No, I must rest my eyes and my body. I can't see clearly anymore, and  
the body is crying for some rest. Excuse me. I am sure you'll find your own way out.  
Bessie         You can count on me.

*(Dick retires out of the studio. Bessie remains.)*

Is that supposed to be me, that scornful mask of contempt with that horrendous laugh pasted on it? A death skull couldn't be more frightful. This laughing hysteria is not me. It's the triumphant self-satisfied megalomania of Dick hysterically intoxicated by his own vanity. What does he call the portrait? What name or title has he given me? *(gets closer, reads)* 'Melancholia'. What kind of a grotesque practical joke is this? He hasn't even allowed me to keep my name! And with this picture he intends to make a success at the salon with another name than mine? No, this is going too far. He separates me from Torp to have me as a model for himself, and then he gives his picture another name as if I never existed. No, I can't accept it. This mad artist simply has to start all over from the beginning again! *(takes up a brush and strikes across the painting, takes some turpentine, pours it over and deletes the face and doesn't stop until the portrait is completely unrecognizable.)* So much for your melancholy! You are welcome to it! *(covers the painting and leaves in fury)*

#### Act IV scene 1.

*Dick (wakes up still dressed in his bed in broad daylight, somewhat confused)* I must have slept more than twelve hours. But why is it so dark? I can't see anything. There should be some daylight. *(fumbles his way out of bed)* It can't be true. I hear the street noise outside. It must be daytime. But I can't see anything. *(rises, grapples around him, fumbles and stumbles, getting increasingly desperate)* I am blind! I am blind! It must not be true! The doctor said six months, but there has only been one! It's unfair! Torp! Torp! *(calls)* Are you there? *(listens. No sound. Collects himself.)* But still I managed to finish the painting. That's the most important thing. Torp! Torp! *(calls again)* He must hear me if he is at home. *(Enter Torp alarmed.)*

Torp.            What is it, Dick? Has anything happened?  
Dick            I am blind! I can't see anything! It passed much quicker than what even my doctor could foresee. I am dead blind! I see nothing!  
Torp.            Take it easy, Dick. You've had those attacks before. They always passed.  
Dick            No, this one doesn't. I know it. I am finished. But at least I completed her portrait.  
Torp.            That's something at least. Did she get paid?  
Dick            More than enough. I gave her fifty pounds. That was the last I saw of her.  
Torp            Then she has nothing more to complain of. And the picture was finished?

Dick            My consummate masterpiece! Lead me to the easel! I can't find my way to it myself. I must learn how to get there.

Torp. (*leads him to the easel*) So in any case you brought her through it to completion.

Dick            My trickiest model. Uncover the portrait and enjoy!

Torp. (*uncovers the portrait and is shocked*)

Dick            Well, what do you think?

Torp. (*tries to recover, with difficulty*) A masterpiece, without doubt, Dick. Did you show it to her?

Dick            Of course I showed it to her!

Torp.            Wasn't she satisfied?

Dick            I don't know. She got paid and left.

Torp. (*taking a deep breath*) You need some rest, Dick. You need to sleep and recover and get into your normal condition. Perhaps the blindness will pass if you just sleep it out. You have been incessantly intoxicated now for several weeks. You need to sleep it off. Come, I will take you to your bed.

Dick    Yes, I am really very tired. But tell me, I did succeed with the portrait, didn't I?

Torp.            Of course you succeeded with the portrait. I knew you would from the start. It is unique. Come now. (*puts him to bed*) Sleep now.

Dick            Do you think she was dissatisfied? I offered to give her more if she wanted. But she seemed to react on the contrary.

Torp.            That you paid her too much?

Dick            Yes.

Torp.            Then she shall have no more. That's obvious. Sleep now. I will be back to check on you, but most important is that you get some sleep.

Dick    Thank you, Torp. It feels as if I finally could sleep now with a good conscience after having brought my work to a proper finish. (*falls back into sleep at once*)

Torp. (*retires*) He is asleep. I should have guessed that she would turn into a disaster. She has won her bet but by the ugliest thinkable foul play. Fortune has turned him blind in the right moment in a stroke of mercy. He must never see the picture, and he must never know how she rewarded him for his flattery. This is unspeakable. What will Maisie say? (*leaves deeply worried*) I can't tell her. She must see it for herself.

## Scene 2. The café.

Maisie (*when Torp. enters after some while*) Has he completed the masterpiece?

Torp.            Yes, it was finished.

Maisie          Was he satisfied?

Torp.            Immensely. His life's masterpiece.

Maisie          I never thought he would be able to go through with it.

Torp.            You must visit him, for his own sake, not for the picture's sake.

Maisie          Is he unwell?

Torp.            You'll see.

*Maisie* I hope he has stopped drinking at least.  
*Torp.* No, he has not stopped drinking.  
*Maisie* Has he started on another picture? Does he keep the same model?  
*Torp.* No, she is gone.  
*Maisie* So the coast is clear.  
*Torp.* Yes, I suppose it is. He needs you, Maisie, now more than ever. You will see it when you see him.  
*Maisie* What is the matter?  
*Torp.* You'll see.  
*Maisie (rising)* I will go there at once.  
*Torp.* Please do. *(She leaves, and he hides his face in his hands.)*

Scene 3. The studio, very neglected, everything in disorder.  
A discreet knock.

*Dick (unshaved, shabby, undressed and dirty)* Come in!  
*Maisie (enters and is shocked)* Dick!  
*Dick* Is it Maisie? You shouldn't have come here.  
*Maisie* But what has happened?  
*Dick* Nothing. I have just gone blind.  
*Maisie (rushes up to him, embracing him)* No, you are not joking! I can see that you can't see me! But when did it happen? Did it come suddenly?  
*Dick* Directly after I had completed my life's portrait. I went to have a rest after the fulfillment of my work and woke up blind.  
*Maisie* Did you have no premonitions?  
*Dick* Since many years. When it started to get difficult I finally went to a doctor. He gave me six months. They turned into one.  
*Maisie* But you completed the picture. And you saw it and was satisfied.  
*Dick* That's how far I came. Then the curtain went down with permanent blackout. I have tried to drink my sight back, but it only grew even worse. The disorder only became more definite.  
*Maisie* Yes, I can see that.  
*Dick* Now at least every one else will be able to enjoy it even if my enjoyment is consumed. Would you like to see it?  
*Maisie* I would love to.  
*Dick* You never wished to see it unfinished, but now it's finished. *(has taken himself to the easel and uncovers the canvas with pride which exposes a totally demolished painting.)*  
*Maisie (is shocked)*  
*Dick* It strikes you, doesn't it? Everyone reacts the same way with stunned astonishment.  
*Maisie (carefully)* And you can't see it yourself?  
*Dick* I can't even see in the dark any more.

*Maisie* But you completed it and saw it?

*Dick* Yes. That was the last thing I saw.

*Maisie* Who has seen it except you and me?

*Dick* Only Torp. He was as benumbed by its appearance as you.

*Maisie* No one else?

*Dick* Yes, the model, of course.

*Maisie* Bessie?

*Dick* Yes. She was the only one not to get impressed.

*Maisie* When was she here last?

*Dick* When I completed the picture. I went to rest while she lingered, but she was ready to leave at once.

*Maisie* What did she think of the picture?

*Dick* She had it already up to her neck for understandable reasons. She was the most difficult of all models, could never sit still, only argue and quarrel, but that was the challenge.

*Maisie* Dick, this place is like a pigstie, and you yourself look worse than out in the war. A helping hand is needed here.

*Dick* Torp has promised to get me an assistant.

*Maisie* You don't want me?

*Dick* Maisie, you have your own life, and you still have your art. Forget me. I am finished as an artist and only have my last picture to live on. The last thing I want is to burden you. Excuse my pride, but I would rather be left alone.

*Maisie* And the doctors give you no hope?

*Dick* None at all. The visual nerve is broken. Already that cut in Sudan damaged it, and the time I have lived on since has been overtime all along.

*Maisie* You are only twenty-five. You still have your entire life.

*Dick* Yes, isn't that ironic?

*Maisie* No, it's only so bloody unfair and tragic.

*Dick* I know. That's why I only want to be left in peace.

*Maisie* Is there nothing I can do for you?

*Dick* Nothing. Please go now, before it gets embarrassing.

*Maisie* It couldn't get more embarrassing, Dick. It couldn't be more pathetic and painful, and the worst thing is that it is not your own fault. But I will always be close to you around you, Dick, especially in your darkness.

*Dick* Thanks, Maisie, leave now, before you start crying.

*Maisie (can't hold her tears and hurries out)*

*Dick* Port should have warned her, – but if she had known it might have been even worse. Well, it's best as it is, and now all I have to do in life is to send in the picture. Then all I have to live on is what it could bring. *(sits down tired with his head in his hands)* My eyes are so useless that they aren't even good for crying any more. *(starts crying dryly and controlledly but in plaintive despair)* O Maisie, not even you could ever understand how sorry I am!

Scene 4. A street.  
Breton meets Bessie.

*Breton* My gentleman would like to see you.  
*Bessie* But I don't want to see him. (*wants to bypass him, but he stops her.*)  
*Breton* You must. He insists.  
*Bessie* Never in my life. He would only like to murder me.  
*Breton* Not at all. He is blind.  
*Bessie* Blind? How on earth did he get blind?  
*Breton* It was expected, but it came suddenly. He is completely harmless.  
*Bessie* But he must be mad at me?  
*Breton* Why should he?  
*Bessie* But this is absurd. An artist just can't be blind. You are pulling my leg.  
*Breton* Not at all. I promise.  
*Bessie* Well then, but if he tries to hit me I'll buzz off at once.  
*Breton* He only wants to see you. He is completely alone. I caught sight of you and recognized you, and then he said: "I must make it up to her for my brutal treatment of her. Now I can get the chance."  
*Bessie* Come then, let's go. (*They go together and meet Dick, much in decline.*)  
But what have they done to you, Dick! The way you look!  
*Dick* They have done nothing. Unfortunately I can't do much to my own appearance any more.  
*Bessie* But what then do you have a valet for?  
*Dick* Come, Bessie, let's go home to my place. We have much to talk about.  
*Bessie* And Port?  
*Dick* He has gone back to Sudan to the war. I am all alone.  
*Bessie* Come then, Dick, and let's fix you up at least! (*takes him under his arm*)(*cautiously*) Do you still have the picture?  
*Dick* Of course. I can't part with it, just as Leonardo da Vinci couldn't part with his Mona Lisa.  
*Bessie* But you must have seen what it looks like?  
*Dick* Of course. I painted it myself, remember?  
*Bessie* But when did you get blind?  
*Dick* The very same night. Your picture was the last thing I saw. When I woke up after the completion of the masterpiece after a long and much needed sleep I was completely blind and have remained so since.  
*Bessie* Goodness gracious!  
*Dick* Yes, indeed.  
*Bessie* Then we really have something to talk about.  
*Dick* Now you are talking.  
*Bessie (to Breton)* Have you seen the picture?  
*Breton* What picture?

*Bessie* And the others? Haven't they seen it either?  
*Breton* His fellow Portenhow has gone away, and his girl friend Maisie he doesn't want to see any more, if you pardon my expression. He wants to be alone with his unhappiness and his suffering. You are the first person he has wished to see.  
*Bessie* What strange twist of fortune then that he can't see me.  
*Breton* Why so? You seem to have turned out a fine lady.  
*Bessie* Yes, I have a job now and have come up somewhat thanks to his money. I almost feel guilty.  
*Breton* Of what?  
*Bessie* His blindness.  
*Dick* My dear Bessie, that's the last thing anyone is guilty of. No one must feel responsible for a purely natural disaster.  
*Bessie* Still I am more guilty than you think. *(They pass on.)*

Scene 5. The studio.

They enter.

*Bessie puts her hands on her hips and inspects the disorder and uncleanliness almost angrily)*  
So that's how you live now, in a rat's nest! Breton, make us some tea immediately and let me talk with this gentleman. *(exit Breton)* Dick, this won't do. You can't live like this.  
*Dick* I know. What do you recommend? Suicide?  
*Bessie* If you can't see with your own eyes someone else must have eyes for you. Breton only tricks you and uses you. I can see at once that all your valuables have disappeared from here.  
*Dick* It's hardly Breton himself but probably his wife.  
*Bessie* What will you do?  
*Dick* What can I do? Nothing! I considered selling the picture, but it will be difficult to part with the last thing I succeeded with.  
*Bessie* Sell the picture?  
*Dick* Yes. I could surely get at least 500 pounds for it. *(goes eagerly to the easel, snatches the cover away and presents the ruined painting to Bessie beaming with joy)* Behold our masterpiece! It's only thanks to you that I could paint it!  
*Bessie (ashamed)* Dick, I can't stand seeing it. *(goes up and covers it)*  
*Dick* Can't you stand your own picture?  
*Bessie* It's too much of myself.  
*Dick* I know. I painted your soul, your superior soul that was greater than all the world which could rightfully laugh it to scorn and reduce it to nothing with all its foolery and vanity by your splendid contempt.  
*Bessie* Dick, I destroyed the painting.  
*Dick* What are you saying?

*Bessie* I was mad at you and wanted to be really wicked. When you had gone to bed I ruined your picture with turpentine and your own brushes. The laughing face is completely empty and not even a face any more.

*Dick* What are you saying?

*Bessie* I say what I say, and you hear what I say.

*Dick (goes deep into thought)* Then I understand Torp's and Maisie's dumb reactions.

*Bessie* Can you forgive me? I thought you would start all over from the beginning. Who could guess that you would wake up blind?

*Dick* Least of all myself. But this means I am free. I don't need to worry any more. I am finished with life, with art, with everything!

*Bessie* What will you do? Can you forgive me?

*Dick* You didn't know what you were doing. You only ruined yourself and my vanity. Now I am free, and it is you that have given me my freedom by telling me the truth, which not even my best friends dared to.

*Bessie* What will you do?

*Dick* I will celebrate my freedom from myself, from art, from everything! I will go back down to where everything started! I will notify Torp of my arrival, and he will meet me. Everything will be all right. (*Breton brings in the tea.*)

*Bessie* Take it away, Breton. It's not needed any more.

*Breton* No tea for neither of you?

*Bessie* And you won't be needed either any longer, Breton. Dick is going away.

*Breton (to Dick)* Is it true, Sir?

*Dick* Yes, it is true. Take out the tea and give it to your wife.

*Breton* As you wish, Sir. (*carries out the tea*)

*Bessie* You'll never see him again.

*Dick* No loss. I won't miss anything of what I leave behind.

*Bessie (gives him her hand)* Good-bye, Dick. Make the best of it.

*Dick* That's exactly what I will do. Thanks for helping me on my way.

*Bessie* That wasn't my intention.

*Dick* But you did.

*Bessie (lets go and hurries out)*

*Dick* All run away from me. All that's left is for me to run away from myself.

(*sits down to think*)

Act V scene 1. (like act I scene 3: Port Said)

Madame Binat's merry establishment.

Vivid life, various customers among fezes and bedouins, Brits, soldiers and light ladies, all more or less drunk, pianola music and cheerful atmosphere, as Dick as a civilian enters discreetly stumbling with his stick and in dark glasses.

*A slut* You seem to have come to the wrong place.

*Dick* Not at all. I am at home here. This is the establishment of Madame Binat.

*The slut*      What is someone like you doing here? Looking for customers?

*Dick*            Madame Binat?

*The slut*      Mum! An old customer is looking for you. (*Dick removes his glasses.*)

*Binat (enters)* By God, it's Dick, the artist!

*Dick*            At last someone who recognizes me.

*Binat*            Have you gone blind?

*Dick*            It doesn't look any better, does it?

*Binat*            A whisky for Dick over here! It's on the house! He is an old customer!

*Dick*      What comfort that there's still something left in this world that hasn't changed.

*Binat*            How did you get blind? Have you come to stay?

*Dick*            No, I am going on out into the desert. They are expecting me there.

*Binat*            Old Port?

*Dick*            Him and a few others.

*George (catching sight of him)* Good heavens! It's Dick! (*makes his way to him*) How did your art dreams turn out?

*Dick*            Into nothing, like everything else.

*George*          Have you come to bury them here?

*Dick*            Exactly. (*puts his glasses back on*) That's the most sensible thing for a blind artist to do.

*George*          By God, Dick, you still have your entire life ahead of you!

*Dick*            Exactly, and it's ruined from the start. Port has promised to help me on. One more, Madame Binat!

*Binat*            Of course. (*He gets another whisky.*)

*Dick*            George, help me up on the table. I want to make a speech.

*George*          Can you keep the balance?

*Dick*            Of course. (*George helps him up on the table. Everyone's attention is caught by the blind man's prank. A moment's pause, and he spreads his arms in a generous gesture calling:*)

Champagne! Champagne to everyone! It's all on me! This is my final farewell party, and I want to make everybody happy, so that they will remember me as someone who wished everybody well, as long as he lived! Champagne! (*Madame responds at once, and everyone who isn't reluctant is offered free champagne.*) Laugh and be happy! This is my farewell show! It will never get better or happier than this! Laugh, Bessie! Scorn life with all its seriousness and artifice! It's only the eternal laugh of death that proclaims the real truth but keeps quiet about it with his eternal grin! Champagne! More champagne!

*George*          You are drunk, Dick.

*Dick*            I know, George, but I couldn't get drunk enough. Help me down before I fall. Where is my stick? (*George helps him down. He gets his stick and gets calmer in a chair.*)

*George*          What will you do?

*Dick*            That's what everyone wonders. I will just follow my blind destiny. My road to freedom leads me out into the desert and back to the war and the endless peace and loneliness out there and beyond, where I shall start all over from the beginning. I haven't even *started* painting yet.



*George* Port has spoken much about you. Everyone knows your story.  
*Dick* It's only the end that's missing. All's well that ends well. That's enough. Help me up. It's good to be home again. I should have stayed here and painted until I died. Now I died before I was finished. It doesn't matter. It's all just a laughing matter after all.  
*George* Can I help you somewhere?  
*Dick* I stay here close by at the old shabby inn. Tomorrow I'll go on. Everything is arranged. Port will take care of me.  
*George* Are you sure you'll manage?  
*Dick* Nothing is surer than that. After all, I am blind and can see everything. So long, George! (*stumbles out on his stick.*)  
*Binat (to George)* At least he never forgot about us for his success.  
*George* He knew what he painted and is the living proof that the finest paintings are those never finished. We'll never see him get finished, but he will always come back.  
*Binat* He is welcome.

*(The party goes on.)*

24-31 March 2016,  
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"The Light that Failed" which Rudyard Kipling wrote at 25 is not exactly a cheerful novel but rather repellent and revolting by its hopelessly pathetic character. I would never have entered the thought of dramatizing it if I hadn't come across William Wellman's outstanding direction of it on film from 1939 with Ronald Colman as the lead and Ida Lupino as the dynamic dynamitard Bessie, which film has improved the novel considerably.