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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BLIND POLICY ***

George Manville Fenn

"Blind Policy"

Chapter One.

In Raybeck Square.

"Oh, you wicked old woman! Ah, you dare to cry, and I'll send you to bed."

"No, no, auntie, don't, please. What will dear Isabel think? You're not going to spoil a delightful evening?"

"Of course she is not. Here, old lady; have another glass of claret—medicinally."

Dr Chester jumped up, gave his sister and the visitor a merry look, took the claret to the head of the table and refilled his own glass.

But the lady shook her grey sausage curls slowly, and elaborately began to unfold a large bordered pocket-handkerchief, puckered up her plump countenance, gazed piteously at the sweet face on her right, bent her head over to her charming niece on the left, and then proceeded to up a few tears.

"No, no, no, Fred; not a drop more. It only makes me worse; I can't help it, my love."

"Yes, you can, old lady. Come, try and stop it. You'll make Bel cry too."

"I wish she would, Fred, and repent before it's too late."

"What!" cried the doctor.

"Don't shout at me, my dear. I want to see her repent. It's very nice to see the carriages come trooping, and to know what a famous doctor you are; but you don't understand my complaint, Fred."

"Oh yes, I do, old lady. Grumps, eh, Laury?"

"No, no, my dear. It's heart. I've suffered too much, and the sight of Isabel Lee, here, coming and playing recklessly on the very brink of such a precipice, is too much for me."

The tears now began to fall fast, and the two girls rose from their seats simultaneously to try and comfort the sufferer.

"Playing? Precipice?" cried the young doctor. "Step back, Bel dear; you shouldn't. Auntie, what do you mean?"

"Marriage, my dear, marriage," wailed the old lady.

"Fudge?" cried the doctor. "Here, take your medicine. No; I'll pour you out a fresh glass. You've poisoned that one with salt water."

"I haven't, Fred."

"You have, madam. I saw two great drops fall in—plop. Come, swallow your physic. Bel, give her one of those grapes to take after it."

"No, no, no!" cried the old lady, protesting. "Don't, Laury;" but her niece held the glass to her lips till she gulped the claret down, and it made her cough, while the visitor exchange glances with the doctor.

"I—I didn't want it, Fred; and it's not fudge. Oh, my dear Isabel, be warned before it is too late. Marriage is a delusion and a snare."

"Yes, and Bel's caught fast, auntie. Just going to pop her finger into the golden wire."

"Don't, my dear; be warned in time," cried the old lady, piteously. "I was once as young and beautiful as you are, and I said yes, and was married, only to be forsaken at the end of ten years, to become a weary, unhappy woman, with only three thousand four hundred and twenty-two pounds left; and it's all melting slowly away, while when it's all gone Heaven only knows what's to become of me."

"Poor old auntie!" said Laura Chester soothingly, taking the old lady's head on her shoulder; but it would shake all the same.

"I had a house of my own, and now I have come down to keeping my nephew's. Don't you marry, my poor child: take warning by me. Men are so deceitful."

"Wrong, auntie. Men were deceivers ever."

"I'm not wrong, Fred. You've been a very good boy to me, but you're a grown man now, and though I love you I couldn't trust you a bit."

"Thank you, aunt dear."

"I can't, my love, knowing what I do. Human nature is human nature."

"Aunt dear, for shame!" cried Laura.

"No, my dear, it's no shame, but the simple truth, and I always told your poor father it was a sin and a crime to expose a young man to such temptation."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the doctor, boisterously. "Here, Bel dear, don't you trust me."

The young people's eyes met, full of confidence, and the old lady shook her head again.

"I know what the world is and what men are," she continued, "and nothing shall make me believe that some of these fashionable patients have anything the matter with them."

"Oh, you wicked old woman!" cried the doctor.

"I'm not, Fred," she cried angrily.

"Oh yes, you are, old lady. You say I don't understand your complaint; it's conscience."

"It is not, sir. I've nothing on my conscience at all."

"I don't believe you, auntie," he cried banteringly. "You must have been a wicked old flirt."

"It is false, sir; and I don't hold with doctors being young and handsome."

"No; I twig. Repentance. You used to go and see one when you were young, and give him guineas to feel your pulse."

"How can you say such wicked things, Fred?" cried the old lady, turning scarlet. "But I will say it now. I'm sure it's not right for you to be seeing all these fine fashionable ladies, scores of them, every day."

"Do take her upstairs, Laury," said the doctor, merrily. "Help her, Bel dear. You hear; I'm a horribly wicked man, and so fascinating that the ladies of Society flock to see me. Now, I appeal to you, dear. Did you ever hear such a wicked, suspicious old woman?"

"Don't, don't, don't, Fred," sobbed the lady in question. "I only spoke for your good. But it can't last long now; and when I'm dead and gone you'll be sorry for all you've said."

"Poor old darling!" said the doctor, affectionately; "she sha'n't have her feelings hurt. Now then, toddle up to the drawing-room. Lie down a bit; and have an early cup of tea, Laury."

"No, no, no," sobbed the old lady. "I'm only a poor, worn-out, useless creature, and the sooner the grave closes over me the better."

She was out at the foot of the stairs, leaning upon her niece's arm, before she had finished her sentence, and Isabel Lee, half troubled, half amused, was following through the door, which the doctor kept open, but he let it go and held out his hands, as the girl looked tenderly up at him. Then the door swung to, and the next moment she was clasped in his arms.

"My darling!" he whispered; and then in the silence which followed they could hear faintly the voice of the old lady on the stairs.

"I'm so sorry, Bel dear," said the doctor tenderly. "She has one of her fits on to-day. Poor old soul, she has had a great deal of trouble."

"I know, Fred dear. I don't mind."

"But it's rather hard on our visitor, whom we want to entertain—queer entertainment."

"Don't talk about it, Fred. Let me go now."

"Without any balm for the suffering, deceitful wretch? Just one."

"Well, only one. Come up soon."

It was, as the doctor said, a very tiny one, and then the girl had struggled free and hurried up to the drawing-room, while the giver went back to his seat.

"Bless her! I honestly believe she's the most amiable girl in the world," said the doctor; as he sat sipping his claret. "Only a fortnight now, and then no more going away. I do love her with all my heart, and I say devoutly, thank God for giving me the chance of possessing so good a partner for life."

He sat sipping thoughtfully.

"Bother the old woman!" he cried suddenly. "To break out like that. Suspicious as ever; but Bel took it the right way. I didn't know I was such a Lothario. How absurd! Now about to-morrow's engagements. Let's see."

He took out a memorandum book, wrinkled up his forehead, and the next minute was deep in thought over first one and then another of the serious cases in which he had to do battle with the grim Shade, ending by getting up and pacing the room, forgetful of all social ties and the presence of his betrothed overhead.

"Oh, Fred!" brought him back to the present.

"Eh? What's the matter, dear?"

"Matter? Well, if ever I have a lover I hope he'll be different to you. There's auntie fast asleep, and poor Isabel sitting watching the door with the tears in her eyes."

"Tut-tut-tut!" ejaculated the brother. "Yes; too bad, but I have a very serious case on hand, dear, and I am obliged to give it a great deal of careful consideration."

"You're always like that now, Fred," said his sister, pettishly. "I hope you don't mean to see patients on your wedding-day."

"Oh, hang it! no, Laury. Here, I'll come up and have some music; but you needn't be so sharp, little one. Gentlemen are allowed to sit over their wine, and you haven't been gone five minutes."

"Monster!" cried Laura. "It's over half an hour!"

"Oh!" ejaculated the doctor, "get out of the way."

He dashed by his sister, and went up the stair three at a time to enter the back drawing-room where he was saluted by a snore from the sofa, and then passed through the folding-doors, his steps inaudible upon the soft carpet. He stood gazing tenderly at the picture he saw in a great mirror of a sweet, sad face resting upon its owner's hand; and his conscience smote him as he saw that the eyes were indeed full of tears.

The next moment there was a faint cry of joy, and the face lit up, for he had stolen behind, sunk upon one knee, passed his arm round the slight waist, and was in the act of pressing his lips to those of his betrothed, when there was a gentle cough, and they started apart, to turn and see Laura's head between the nearly closed folding-doors, with a mischievous look in her eyes.

"Oh, Bel! For shame!" she whispered merrily. "You don't seem to take poor Aunt Grace's words a bit to heart."

"You come in and behave yourself," said the doctor. "Don't you begin making mischief."

"I'm not coming in, Fred," said the girl, saucily. "I don't like to see such goings-on. Is that the way people make love?"

The doctor sprang up threateningly and made for the doors, but the head disappeared.

"She'll never grow into a woman, Bel dear," said the doctor, turning to her.

"Oh yes, I shall," came from the door, as the head was thrust in again. "Now I'm going to sit with auntie till she wakes. Go on with your love-making, Daphnis and Chloe. Oh, I shall be so glad when you've both come to your senses again."

This time the door closed with a click, and the doctor sank on his knee again by Isabel, and drew her to him fondly.

"Been thinking of what poor old aunt said, Bel?" he whispered, as her head sank upon his shoulder.

"No, not at all I only wanted you to come."

"And you trust me fully?"

"Of course, Fred. You know I do."

"And always will?"

"How can you ask me?"

"It is so pleasant to be told that you have the fullest confidence in your husband to be. Tell me you trust me."

"It is insulting you, Fred," said the girl gently as she gazed in his eyes. "How could I accept you if I did not know you to be the truest, bravest—Oh, Fred!"

"I was obliged to stop those flattering lips," he said. "I'm vain enough of having won my darling, and—Oh, hang it!"

"I beg pardon, sir; I did knock," said the servant. "Urgent, sir. A lady in your consulting-room."

"All right; down directly," said the doctor, who had started up. "I say, Bel darling, I must be more professional. You mustn't lock me in your dear arms like this without you turn the key. I sha'n't be long."

Isabel Lee uttered a low sigh as her betrothed made for the door, and as he passed out there was the sound of voices in the back drawing-room, Aunt Grace having finished her nap.

"Who is it, Laury?"

"I don't know, aunt dear; something urgent. Smith said a lady."

"Another lady? and at this time of night?"

"People fall ill at all times, aunt dear," said the girl, coldly. "Hush! don't say any more please; Isabel will hear you."

"But I can't help it, my dear," said the lady in a peevish whisper, every word of which reached the visitor's ears. "Oh dear me, I wish Fred was not so good-looking. Well, it's only another fortnight. I begin to think he ought to be married at once."

Chapter Two.

A Strange Case.

Two gloveless hands caught Dr Chester's as he entered his consulting-room, and a strange thrill ran through him as a beautiful face, wild-eyed and agitated, was thrust close to his.

"Dr Chester? Oh, at last! Come—quickly! before it is too late."

"Pray be calm," he said, motioning his visitor to a seat, but she threw back her head.

"Come!" she cried imperiously. "The brougham is at the door. Quick! He is dying."

"Pray explain yourself, madam," said the doctor.

"Oh, how can you be so cold-blooded? Man, I tell you that Robert is dying. He must not—he shall not die. Come—come!"

"But, my dear madam!"

"I'll explain everything as we go," cried the visitor, passionately, as she drew him towards the door. "A terrible accident. Come and save his life."

At another time Fred Chester might have hesitated, but there was a strange magnetism in the eyes of his beautiful visitor—an appeal in the quivering lip. Every feature was drawn by the agitation from which she suffered. It was his profession to help in emergencies—evidently some terrible crisis had arisen, and he felt it impossible to resist.

He threw open the door, there was a faint gasp of satisfaction as he caught up his hat, and the next moment, with his visitor holding still tightly by his hand, he was descending the broad steps, perfectly ignorant of the fact that Aunt Grace was standing at the top of the first flight of stairs, watching intently.

By the light of the gas lamps Chester saw a handsomely-appointed brougham drawn up at the kerb. His companion said the one word "Home," then stepped quickly into the carriage, the doctor followed, and they were driven off at a rapid pace.

The night was dark, and it was by flashes of the lamps they passed that he had glimpses of the beautiful, quivering face leaning earnestly toward his. He was conscious of the delicate scent emanating from the dress; the warm perfumed breath reached his face, and there was, as it were, a magic in the contact with her rustling robe, as they sped along the streets. A wild intoxication seemed to have seized upon him in those moments, before he could master himself sufficiently to say—

"Will you explain the accident?"

"Yes, yes, as soon as I can speak," was panted out. "I—I—ah—h—ah!"

The speaker lurched toward him, and he caught her, fainting, in his arms. But her strong will mastered the weakness, and she struggled free.

"Better now," she panted. "Doctor, we had heard of you, I came myself. He is dying. Oh, faster—faster!" she cried, and leaning forward she beat upon the front window, there was a quick movement on the part of the driver, and the horses seemed to fly.

"It was like this. We were at dessert. Robert was examining a pistol. It went off, and he is horribly wounded. Dr Chester, oh, for Heaven's sake, save my poor boy's life!"

"With Heaven's help, madam, I will," said the doctor, earnestly, "if we are not too late."

"Too late—too late? Oh no, no, no, we cannot be too late! Quicker! Quicker! These horses seem to crawl. Oh, it is too horrible—too horrible! I cannot bear it!"

By a quick, impulsive movement the speaker threw herself forward, to sink upon her knees in the bottom of the brougham, pressing her hands to her mouth, and resting her face upon them against the padded cushion by the front window; while, feeling strangely moved, Chester leaned slightly over her with his hands half raised, in the desire he dared not gratify, to raise her to her seat and whisper gentle words of comfort. At that time it did not occur to him that it seemed strange for a gentleman—he must be a gentleman; everything suggested it—to be handling a pistol at dessert. All he could think of was the terrible suffering of his companion, and his attention was centred upon her as he saw the agony she suffered, while as yet he could do nothing.

She sprang up as suddenly as she had thrown herself down, and her voice and look thrilled him again as she said sharply—

"I can't pray: it is too horrible. Don't notice me; don't speak to me, please, doctor. I am half mad."

She flung herself back in the corner and covered her face with her hands, while, totally oblivious of the direction taken by the driver, Chester sat back in his own place, gazing at his companion, and weaving a romance.

It was some story of love, he told himself—love and jealousy—for the woman at his side was beautiful enough to tempt a saint. That was it, he was sure, and the distracted husband had attempted to or had committed suicide.

"What is it to me?" he said to himself, fiercely, and he wondered now that he should have been so strangely moved. His professional instincts had the mastery again, and for the first time he looked out through the drawn-up glass to try and see what street they were in. But at that moment his companion started again.

"Shall we never be there?" she cried in her agony. "Ah! at last!"

For the horses were pulled up suddenly, there was a flash of light from an open hall, and a gentleman ran down and tore open the brougham door.

"Brought him?"

"Yes, yes!" cried the lady, springing out and turning to snatch at the doctor's wrist and hurry him up the steps.

Once more the strange thrill ran through Fred Chester's nerves and his heart throbbed heavily. Then they were inside a handsome entry, and he saw statuary, pictures, a cluster of electric lights, in rapid sequence, as he hurried over soft carpets to the back of the house, and into a handsome dining-room in which some eight or nine ladies and gentlemen in evening dress were clustered about a couch drawn up near a table covered with glass and plate, flowers, fruit, and the signs of the interrupted dessert, seen by a bouquet of soft incandescent lights.

The sight of the figure on the couch was enough, and Chester was fully himself as his companion ran to the sufferer, threw herself on her knees, and kissed the white face there.

"Be my own brave boy," she whispered hoarsely. "The doctor is here."

"Be kind enough to leave the room, all but two of you gentlemen," said Chester, sternly.

"No; I shall stay," cried the lady, firmly, as she threw off the thick mantilla and fur-lined cloak, to stand there bare-armed and palpitating. "I will not leave you, Rob," she cooed over the wounded man. "Doctor, I will be nurse."

The doctor bowed his head, and as all left the room but two of the gentlemen, he hurriedly made his examination, and probed in vain for the bullet, which had passed in under the left shoulder-blade, inflicting a dangerous wound, against which, at intervals, the lady pressed her handkerchief.

The patient bore all with remarkable fortitude, and in the moments of his greatest agony set his teeth and held on by his nurse's hand, while she bent down from time to time from watching every movement of the doctor, and pressed her trembling lips to the sufferer's hand.

At last the examination was over, and the wounded man lay very white and still; while Chester made use of a finger-glass and napkin to remove the ugly marks from the white hands.

"Drink this, doctor," whispered one of the gentlemen who had waited upon him, no servant having been seen.

Chester, who had had eyes only for his patient, turned sharply, and took a tumbler of Burgundy from the well-bred man who offered it, drank a few mouthfuls, and set the glass down close by the weapon which had caused the wound, and which lay near a dish containing a large pine.

Chester raised his brows a little as he now saw the richness of the table appointments, and at the same time grasped the fact that he was in some wealthy home. Then this was endorsed as he turned and his eyes lit upon the lady kneeling on the other side of the couch, pale and beautiful, for he noted that she had magnificent diamonds in her hair, about her neck, and clasped upon her soft white wrists.

"Say something, doctor," she whispered pleadingly.

"I cannot, madam, yet."

"But he will live?" she wailed.

"Please God, madam. Gentlemen, the case is serious," he said, turning to those who were watching him. "I should like someone else called in for consultation."

"No," said one of the gentlemen, decisively. "If you cannot save him, no one can."

"Jem," said the other, hoarsely, "it's murder not to—"

"Silence!" said the first speaker, sternly. "Dr Chester will save him if he is to be saved."

"Oh, Jem, Jem!" moaned the lady.

"Be quiet, Marion. He is in the right hands. No, doctor, we will have no one else called in."

A low moan from the wounded man took Chester's attention, and he knelt down again to bathe his face and lips with brandy, while the two gentlemen went to a door at the other end, passed out, and a low, hurried dispute arose, all in whispers.

Chester heard a word or two—angry words—and grasped the fact that there must have been some desperate quarrel, ending in the unfortunate man before him being shot down. A chair was overturned, and glasses and decanters upset, as if from a struggle. But the patient was apparently slipping away, and for hour after hour through that night Chester fought the grim Spectre, striving to tear the victim from his hands, seeing nothing, nothing, nothing, forgetting everything—home, Isabel, the anxious woman at his side. His every nerve was strung to the fight, and at last he felt that he had won.

His face showed it as he rose, uttering a sigh of relief, and his fellow-watcher at the other side of the couch sprang from her knees, caught his hands in hers, and kissed them passionately, while the rest of the company came slowly back into the room.

"Then he'll live, doctor?" whispered the gentleman the others had addressed as Jem.

"I hope so. He is sleeping easily now. I will come back about nine. There is not likely to be any change. If there is, of course I must be fetched."

"Have some refreshment, doctor," said the gentleman he addressed. "You must not leave him."

Wearied out as he was, this was enough to irritate Chester.

"I am the best judge of that, sir," he said coldly. "Of course the patient must not be left."

"That is what we all feel, doctor. Ask what fee you please, but you must stay."

"Yes, yes; pray, pray stay, doctor," cried the lady in a pleading voice which went to his heart.

"It is impossible, madam. I have others to think of as well as your—friend."

He could not for the life of his husband.

"I will be back about nine."

"Sir, we beg of you to stay," said the gentleman who took the lead, earnestly.

"I have told you, sir, that I cannot. I must leave you now."

"No, no, doctor!" whispered the lady.

"Madam, it is not necessary for me to stay now. Silence, I beg. The patient must be kept quiet."

"Yes—quiet," said the chief speaker. "Doctor, we have asked you not to leave us; now we must insist."

"What! Why?"

"Because we decline to let you go till your patient is quite out of danger."

"What!" cried Chester, sharply, over-excited by what he had gone through. "Am I to be kept a prisoner?"

"If you like to call it so. Everything you desire you can have, but you cannot leave here yet."

"Absurd!" said Chester, angrily, and as he spoke he saw that two of the gentlemen present moved to the door by which he had entered. "I insist upon going at once."

"You cannot, sir."

"Stand aside, sir, and let me pass!" cried Chester, sternly, as his opponent moved between him and the door.

"Jem, for pity's sake"—whispered the lady. "Doctor, I beg, I pray you to stay."

"It is impossible, madam, now. Let me pass, sir." There was a fierce motion made towards the patient, but Chester did not heed it. He saw that the other occupants of the room were closing him in, in answer to a gesture made by the gentleman in front.

The spirit within him was roused now, and in his resentment he stepped fiercely forward with extended hand, when his opponent thrust his hand into his breast with a menacing gesture.

Quick as thought, Chester stepped back and caught up the revolver he had seen lying upon the table.

There was a faint cry, and two white hands were laid upon his breast.

“Stand aside, Marion!” and there was a click from the lock of another pistol.

“Doctor! for his sake!—pray!”

Chester turned from her sharply, as if to avoid her eyes. Then flashed his own upon the man who barred his way.

“Is this the rehearsal of some drama, sir?” he said scoffingly. “I refuse all part in it. Now have the goodness to let me pass, for pass I will.”

He threw the pistol he held upon the carpet, and once more advanced toward the door, braving the weapon pointed at his head.

“Bah!” he cried; “do you think to frighten me with that theatrical nonsense?”

“Keep back, sir, or I fire.”

At that moment a white hand pressed the electric button by the side of the heavy mantelpiece, the room was suddenly darkened, and a sharp crack and rattling sound announced the locking of the door and withdrawing of the key.

“Then there has been foul play,” muttered Chester. “Into what trap have I fallen here?”

Chapter Three.

Two Hundred Guineas.

Chester took a couple of steps to his right, for there was a faint sound in the pitchy darkness which he interpreted to mean the advance of an enemy. Then in the perturbation of spirit and nervousness of the moment, he moved a step or two cautiously in what he believed to be the direction of the other door, and stopped short, half-dazed by the feeling of confusion which comes upon one in a dense fog.

“Who did that?” said the voice he recognised. “You, Marion, of course. Here, you go to your room.”

There was no reply.

“Do you hear me? It is no time for fooling now.”

“Yes, I hear you, but I will not leave his side. You cowards! do you want to kill me too?”

“Hold your tongue. Di—Paddy—all of you, get hold of the mad fool before worse comes of it.”

There was a faint cry, a panting and scuffling, the word “Help!” blurred and stifled as if a hand had been suddenly clapped over the speaker’s lips, and Chester mentally saw his beautiful companion of the brougham struggling violently as she was being half carried from the room.

Stirred by excitement to the deepest depths, Chester rushed to her help, and was brought up sharp by the dining table, while the scuffling continued upon the other side.

He felt his way along the edge, to pass round it in the darkness, but the noise he made betrayed his whereabouts, and his next step took him into the grasp of a pair of strong hands, which held him firmly, and before he could free himself, there was the sound of a door opening, a faint light showed for a moment, and before it was shut off he dimly saw the actors in the struggle; then the door was closed, and the voice of him addressed as Jem said sharply—

“Light up, Paddy.”

A glass was knocked from the table; someone stumbled against a chair; an angry oath followed; and then came the rattle of massive fire-irons.

“Are you drunk, man?” came in the same voice.

“Drunk? no! but I’m not an owl,” was growled. “Ah! that’s it.”

The cluster of incandescent lights glowed golden, and then brightened, showing the doctor that the dining table was between him and the couch where his patient lay, white and motionless; the tall, decisive man standing where he had last seen him, close to the door; a heavy-featured young fellow with a family likeness close by the mantelpiece; another, the one who had held him, close by.

“Well, doctor,” said the chief spokesman, cynically, “the storm has passed over. All unexpected only a few hours ago, and we were seated happily after our coffee and cigarettes, when that idiot began to play the fool with his revolver, and shot himself. Troubles never come alone. Now, my dear sir, let me apologise for what has happened since we all lost our tempers and behaved so foolishly.”

Chester looked at him sternly and remained silent.

“You will excuse my hastiness. I was excited in my anxiety about the poor fool there, and you see now how imperative it is that you should not leave him till he is safe.”

“Will you be good enough to unlock that door, sir, and let me pass through?” said Chester, coldly.

"To be perfectly plain, doctor—no, I will not. Let us understand one another at once. You will have to stay and make the best of it."

"I shall not stay, sir, and as soon as I leave here I shall take what steps seem, after due thought, to be correct over what has been an outrage toward me; and without doubt a murderous attack upon that unfortunate man."

"Murderous attack? Absurd, doctor! An accident."

"Do you take me for a child, sir? He could not have shot himself. Now, if you please, unlock that door."

"When I unlock it, doctor, it will be to go out and lock you in," said the other, grimly. "There, sir, it is of no use to struggle, so make the best of it. You are in for a week, but we'll make it as comfortable for you as we can. Like to send home a telegram?"

"Will you have the goodness to understand me, sir!" said Chester, firmly.

"I do, my dear doctor, but you will not understand me. A week with your patient will not hurt you, and a fee of a couple of hundred guineas shall be paid—now, if you like. There, I will be plain with you, as a man of the world. It was a family quarrel, and two hot-headed fools drew their revolvers—Yankee fashion. Here, Paddy, see that we have some coffee and liqueurs. Cigar or cigarette, doctor? Sit down, and let's chat it over like sensible men."

"I do not wish to come to a struggle and blows again, sir," said Chester, firmly. "Please understand that you are wasting words. I mean to leave this house at once."

"We often mean to do things that are impossible, doctor. You cannot. So act sensibly. Take some refreshment, and attend to your patient. Will you have the goodness to look round this room?"

Chester made no reply.

"You will not smoke? I will. My nerves want soothing."

The speaker lit a large cigar, and left the gold-mounted case open upon the table.

"Better take one," he said as he exhaled the fragrant fumes; "they are rather fine. Now, doctor; that door communicates with the back the hall, and it is locked; that other one with a lobby from which the upper and lower parts of the house are reached; and it, too, is locked. You naturally intend to communicate with the outside. Well, you cannot. This dining-room has no windows, and is lit up night and day. You are a prisoner, my dear sir, and you will not communicate with the servants, for you will see none. These gentlemen will help me as your gaolers; an eminently respectable old housekeeper—lady-like I may say, eh, Paddy?"

The young man addressed nodded and grinned.

"A lady-like body will see that all your animal wants are provided for; a chair-bed will be brought in; and to make your stay more pleasant two or three of us will take you to the billiard-room overhead and have a game with you—by the way, that place has only skylights. Where we stand used to be a sooty cat-walk of a garden till we built these rooms over. A great improvement to the house."

"Who are you? What house is this?" said Chester, sharply.

"Your host, sir; and the house is ours—at your service. Better have a cigar. 'Needs must when the devil drives.' That is your position now—I playing the devil."

A low moan from the wounded man changed the current of the doctor's thoughts; and with the others watching him curiously, he went straight to his patient's side to place a cushion behind him and relieve the pressure upon his wound, after which the patient seemed to sink once more into a state of repose.

As Chester left him he received an approving nod.

"We fellows would not have thought of that. Ah, here's the coffee. Come, doctor, accept your position. It is folly to beat against the bars of a prison when they are too strong."

For at that moment the heavy-faced young man, who seemed to be a thorough athlete, came back into the room from the other end, bearing a silver tray with handsome fittings; and Chester started slightly, for he had not seen him go, and he realised now that he must have been occupied for some little time with his patient.

Just then he saw that the leader of the little party whispered something which he interpreted to mean, "Let him alone; he'll come to his senses;" and he began to think out his position.

Everything seemed in accordance with what had been told him: he was alone, one man against four—gentlemen, evidently, but plainly enough strongly-built, athletic fellows, who looked to be lovers of out-door sports, and each of them in a struggle more than his match.

His rage had cooled down somewhat, and his common-sense began to prevail. It was hard to master his resentment, and he could not make out what was at the back of it all, more than what was evidently plain—a terrible family quarrel, the participators in which were anxious to keep out of the papers, and possibly from the police courts. He did not know who they were, nor, as he realised now, in what street he was; but that, he felt, he could soon make out. It was awkward. They would be anxious in Raybeck Square, but he would send a message and set them at rest.

"I wonder whether they kept Bel all night," he said to himself; and at this thought others came, and among them a strange feeling of annoyance with himself as he recalled his feelings, during the little journey, towards his summoner.

Then he hurriedly cast these thoughts aside, and began once more to ponder on his position, walking slowly to and fro, close to the couch, while the little party, who had lit up cigars, now began to sip their coffee.

The next minute the heavy-faced young fellow known as "Paddy" approached him with a cup and the cigar-case.

"I put a liqueur of brandy in it, doctor," he said in a low voice. "I say, do you think the poor chap will get over it?"

"I hope so," replied Chester, shortly.

"Thank God!" said the young man, warmly. "I say, doctor, don't cut up rough. You're in a hole, but I'll see you're all right. You'll take a cigar?"

He said the last words so reproachfully that Chester could hardly forbear to smile; and he took a cigar, lit it, and then, feeling utterly exhausted, tossed off the coffee and brandy, after which he resumed his walk up and down by the couch.

"Needs must when the devil drives," he said to himself. "It's of no use to fight. I must pull this poor fellow through, but I'll make them pay for it. Seems like a dream. I suppose I am awake."

The coffee and cigar were having their effect, and at the end of an hour, during which the party at the end of the table had been conversing in a low voice, a moan or two from the sufferer finished the tendency towards submission, and Chester busied himself for some time about the couch. Then, rising once more, "Pen and ink," he said shortly, and the heavy-featured young fellow fetched him a blotting-case and inkstand.

"A telegraph form, too."

"Plenty there, doctor."

Chester wrote quickly for a few minutes, and then handed a couple of papers to the young fellow, who had stopped close at hand.

"I want this prescription made up at the chemist's, and the telegram sent respecting a substitute to see my patients."

"All right, doctor," and the recipient took both to the end of the table, and gave them to the man who seemed to be his brother.

The latter took the papers and rose to cross to Chester.

"Thank you, doctor," he said quietly. "You will do your best, I see. Please bear in mind that money is no object to us here. Our cousin's life is."

He went out of the room directly, returned soon after, and brought with him a quiet, sedate-looking old lady in black silk and white apron.

She was very pale, and her eyes looked wild and strange, as she went straight to the couch, leaned over and kissed the patient's forehead, and then set to work and cleared the disordered table, almost without a sound, two of the young men joining her and helping to carry the dessert things out by the farther door.

Chester's face must have told tales, for he started round in surprise to find that he had been carefully watched by the leader of the little plot to detain him.

"You could not get out that way, doctor," he said quietly. "We are a very united family here, and the housekeeper is devoted to us."

Chester frowned with annoyance.

"I understand you," he said; "but mind this: every dog has his day, sir, and mine will come, unless revolvers are brought into play and an awkward witness silenced."

"My dear doctor, you are romantic," was the sarcastic reply. "Don't be alarmed; we shall not shoot and bury you on the premises, for sanitary reasons. It might affect the nerves of our ladies, too. There, all we want of you is your skill to set that poor fellow right, and then you can return home, better paid than seeing ordinary patients. How does he seem?"

An angry retort was at Chester's lips, but he did not utter it. He accepted his position, for the time being, and replied quietly—

"Going on well, but he will be the better for a sedative. Feverish, of course. Have you sent that prescription?"

"Yes, it has been taken, and the chemist will be rung up to dispense it. I say, doctor; no fear of a bad ending?"

"And no thanks to the man who fired at him from behind," said Chester, looking straight at his questioner as he spoke. "Fortunately the bullet passed diagonally by his ribs, an inch to the right—"

"Yes, yes, the old story, doctor; but I did not fire the shot."

"Pray don't excuse yourself, sir," said Chester, coldly. "I am not a magistrate; only a medical man with the customary knowledge of surgery."

"And a little more, too," was the reply, with a smile. "There, doctor, we will not quarrel this morning, and you will not introduce the matter to the police. It will pay you better to be silent; but if you preferred to talk about it I'm afraid you would not be believed."

The speaker smiled cynically as he saw the effect of his words, and walked away, leaving Chester thinking deeply, and, in spite of his anger and annoyance, beginning more and more to feel that he had better accept his position.

"It is a strange experience," he said to himself, as he sank back in an easy-chair by the couch; "but a fee of two

hundred guineas! Bel shall have it in the shape of a present. She will not fidget when she has had my wire."

Chapter Four.

The Strange Attraction Proves Too Strong.

"There, I promise I will be quiet and say nothing, if you let me stay. If you do not, I'll give the alarm in spite of you all."

"Pat! He's waking up."

With the tones of the sweet, rich voice thrilling his nerves, Fred Chester opened his eyes as he sat back in his chair, and gazed up at the cluster of soft lights glowing by the ceiling; but they did not take his attention. He was dwelling wonderingly upon the words he had heard as if in a dream.

His head was heavy and confused, and it was some moments before he could grasp his position. "Who's waking up?" he thought. Then his eyes fell, and he looked sharply down, and the blood rushed surging to his temples as he saw his beautiful visitor of the night before, then all came back in a moment.

She was kneeling beside the wounded man's couch, holding his hand, and she gazed at Chester with an appealing, wistful look in her eyes which again sent a thrill through him, and a feeling of misery and despair such as he had never before felt made his heart sink. He shivered slightly as he turned away, to glance round the room and note that four of those whom he had previously seen were still present.

"You've had a good nap, doctor," said a familiar voice.

"Have—have I been asleep?" said Chester, involuntarily.

"Beautifully. What a delightfully clear conscience you must have, doctor!" said the speaker, banteringly, "that is, if you did not take a chloral pill on the sly. Six hours right off."

"Impossible!" cried Chester, angrily.

"Then my watch is a most awful liar, and the clock on the chimney-piece there has joined in the conspiracy."

Chester hurriedly took out his watch, to find that the hands stood at two, as he bent down over his patient, who was sleeping calmly.

"We gave him a dose of the drops as soon as the bottle came, doctor, for we did not like to wake you after your hard night. He has slept like a lamb ever since."

Chester took no notice of the words, as he busied himself about his patient, the lady drawing back and going to a chair, waiting impatiently till he ceased.

"How is he?" she said then excitedly.

"He could not be doing better, madam," said Chester, trying to speak coldly, and avoiding for a moment the eyes which seemed to plunge searchingly into his; and at his words he saw that they suddenly grew dim, and that she clapped her hands to her lips to keep back a piteous sob or two.

"Hush, hush, my dearest," whispered the old housekeeper in a motherly way, and Chester saw that a strong effort was made, and the face from which he could not tear his eyes grew calm.

"Well, doctor, if ever I am in a bad fix, I shall know where to apply."

Chester turned sharply to the speaker, and read from the cynical smile that he had seen the impression made upon him by the agitated face which possessed so strange a fascination.

"You prove yourself quite worthy of your reputation, which has often reached us."

"Any surgeon could have done what I have, sir," replied Chester, shortly, and then mastering himself, he continued, as he thought of home and all he had at stake, "I presume that now you are at rest about your cousin's state, this sorry farce is at an end."

"Very nearly a tragedy, my dear sir," said the other, lightly.

"You mistake me, sir. I mean this enforced detention."

"Oh, tut, tut, doctor! I thought we had settled this. Surely after your telegram, taken to the chief office, madam, your wife, will not be uneasy."

As he spoke he gave the lady by the couch a mocking look, and Chester saw her turn angrily away.

It was on the doctor's lips to say sharply, "I am not married, sir," and he felt startled as he checked himself.

Why should he have been so eager to say that? he thought, and a peculiar feeling of resentment grew within, as a strange conscience-pricking began to startle him. Of what folly had he been guilty in thought?

"Come, doctor, we have been waiting till you woke before having some breakfast."

The speaker rose and touched the electric bell-push, then led the way toward a small table at the far end of the room, the others waiting for the doctor to follow; but he stood irresolute.

"You will join us at breakfast, doctor?" said a low, sweet voice at his side, making him start slightly, and then follow to the table, to take the place pointed out by his companion on her right, as she took the head of the table.

"As his wife," thought Chester; then trying hard to be perfectly cool, and assuming to be treating his position lightly, he partook of the meal placed before him, and joined in the general conversation, a great deal of which dealt with the popular out-door life of the day—Lord's, Ascot, the promises of sport in August and September, and the ordinary topics of the hour, all lightly traversed by a party of gentlemen who had ample incomes for their needs, and enjoyed life.

The ladies were increased to three when they took their seats at the table, and Chester soon found that two were the young wives of "Jem" and "Paddy," the bluff, manly fellow; and all seemed so intent now upon ignoring the trouble and setting their prisoner guest at his ease, that Chester's manner softened, and before they rose from the table he found himself listening with increasing interest to his neighbour's remarks.

The excellent meal came at last to an end, and after a few words with Chester's companion, two of the ladies retired while the housekeeper quietly cleared the table; and as Marion, as they all called her, went to the side of the couch, Jem approached Chester.

"The papers," he said in the most matter-of-fact way. "Cigars and cigarettes on that table. Spirits and soda or seltzer in the cellarette. Pray make yourself at home, my dear doctor, and name anything you want. It shall be obtained directly—everything, that is, but liberty. Won't you light up now? My cousin there will not mind; we all smoke. Eh, Marion?"

"I beg that Dr Chester will not hesitate," said the lady addressed, and Chester drew a deep breath as he saw her cross to the table and fetch a cigarette-box and matches.

"It would be ungracious to refuse," he said coldly, as he took one, and then the lighted match from the white fingers which offered it, their eyes meeting as he lit his cigarette, and as a slight flush mantled the lady's cheeks, Chester's heart gave one heavy throb.

The rest of that night-like day passed in a dream, or a time in which Chester felt as if he were suffering from some form of enchantment. He fought hard against the strange, new, mystic influence, and strove to raise like a shield to protect him, his honour, his word; and again and again as he busied himself with his patient he told himself that he dearly loved Isabel, his betrothed, but this feeling was all as new as it was masterful, and often when he met the eyes of her who never left the couch in her assiduous attentions as nurse, he felt that he was drifting fast into a state of slavery, and that this woman was his fate.

"She is another's wife," he kept telling himself; "and I am an utter scoundrel to give way to such thoughts. Heaven help me! I must go before it is too late. Have I been drugged, and has the potent medicament sapped me to the very core?"

But he felt that he could not go as yet, for though it was unnoticed by the others, he saw that a change for the worse had taken place toward evening, at a time when all had left the room but the big, athletic fellow and Marion, they being evidently left on guard while a short rest was taken.

Paddy was sitting back smoking, with his eyes half-closed; but he suddenly roused himself up and came across to the couch.

"How is he getting on?" he whispered.

Chester was silent, and after glancing at him, Marion spoke—

"He is better; sleeping well, and in less pain."

"Don't look better," grunted the young man, and he glanced at his watch. "Dinner at eight. Like to go and lie down, Marion?"

"No," was the quiet reply.

"All right," said the young man, and he walked back to his seat, while Marion waited for a few moments, and then, gazing wistfully at Chester, said in a low whisper—

"You did not speak. He is better, is he not?"

The young doctor made no reply, but sat there breathing hard, as if fascinated.

"I cannot tell you how grateful I feel to you," she continued. "Your coming here has saved poor dear Robert's life. I know how strange it all must seem to you, but I—we dare not let you go. It is such a terrible emergency."

"Yes," he said softly, "and I have done my best."

"But I cannot help reading it in your eyes, doctor—you are thinking of leaving."

He started slightly, and then turned his eyes to his patient so as to avoid the gaze which held him in spite of the mental struggle against what seemed to be fate.

"Well," he said, as he laid his hand upon the sufferer's brow, "I am. Is it not natural? Yes," he whispered hoarsely, "by some means I must and will leave this house to-night."

Her face grew convulsed, and for a few moments she was silent. Then in a low, impassioned whisper, she reached across the couch to lay her hand upon his arm, the contact seeming to send a hot flush through every nerve, and he turned to gaze at her with a look half horror, half delight.

"And you hold his life in your hands," she murmured piteously. "What can I say?—what can I do to move you? Doctor, he is everything to me in this world. If he—died, I could not live."

"For Heaven's sake, don't look at me—don't speak to me like that!" he whispered back, and he took her hand to remove it from his arm, shivering as if it were some venomous thing; but it turned and clung to his fast, and was joined by the other. "Madam, I have done, and am doing, everything I can to save your husband's life, and—"

He ceased speaking, for he saw her lips part in a smile, and her wild eyes grew soft and humid, as, with a little laugh, she said—

"Dearest Rob! My husband!" Then she loosed the hand she held, laid hers upon the head of the couch, and bending down she softly pressed her lips against the patient's brow, while a feeling of bitter jealousy sent the blood surging through Chester's brain, till the eyes were turned again to his, and, with a look that sent every forming manly intention flying to the winds, she said softly—

"Why did you think that? Doctor, for a poor, pleading woman's sake, give up all thought of going. I could not bear it. There—look—his face is growing convulsed," she whispered in a quick, agitated tone, "And you talk of going! He is dying. Robert! Robert! Oh, doctor, do you not see?"

Chapter Five.

Aunt Grace Sows the Seed of Discontent.

Laura Chester possessed what her aunt termed a bad habit.

"You are so restless, my dear," said that lady. "Why can't you stay in your bed of a morning, and then come down at a Christian-like hour?"

"Nine o'clock, aunt dear," said the girl, smiling.

"Well, say a quarter to, my dear, because that gives ample time to ring for the urn and make the tea, though nine is really a very nice hour. It is not right for a young lady to be racing downstairs before seven o'clock and dusting; and I do not really like for you to be going out for walks at such early hours."

"London is at its best before breakfast, aunt; everything looks so fresh and bright."

"What nonsense, my dear! Nothing of the kind. The steps are not cleaned, and there is nobody about but sweeps and dustmen, and milk carts."

"Oh yes, aunt dear," cried Laura, merrily. "London is very busy then, and I wish I could get you to come. Covent Garden is lovely quite early with the flowers and fruit."

"My dear Laura, to hear you talk anyone would think your poor dear papa had been a greengrocer. Pray, do, my dear, try and give up the bad habit. I really don't know what Isabel must think."

But the habit only grew stronger, and on the morning after her brother's sudden call, Laura slipped out while cook was cleaning the steps and went off to Covent Garden to return with a bunch of roses and a basket of strawberries which had been picked that morning nine miles down the western road.

The breakfast was ready, and she was giving the last touches to her arrangement of flowers and fruit upon the table when Isabel joined her, looking as fresh as the flowers in the little shallow bowl.

"Oh, Laury, I am so ashamed at being so late," she cried, after an affectionate kiss had been exchanged. "I was afraid I was last."

"Oh no, dear; auntie is not down," said Laura, glancing at the clock. "She'll be ten minutes yet."

"Is she always so punctual?"

"Yes. She does not leave her room till the church clock begins to strike. She is very proud of being so exact."

"Is—is—"

"Fred down? No, dear. There! don't blush, goosey. I expect he was kept late last night, and he loses so much rest, that we never disturb him. He has his breakfast at all sorts of times, but it will be at nine this morning."

This was accompanied by an arch look.

"Oh, how sweet the flowers are!" cried Isabel, turning away to hide the heightened colour in her cheeks.

"Yes, dear," said Laura, banteringly, "and life now is all roses and sweets, and the sky was never so blue, and the London sparrows' 'chiswick, chiswick' sounds like the song of nightingales, doesn't it? Heigho! I wish I were in love, and someone loved me, and put his arm round my waist and took me for walks along the primrose path of dalliance."

There was a light step behind her, two arms were passed about her waist, a soft, white chin rested upon her shoulder, and a rounded cheek was pressed to hers.

"Don't tease me, Laury darling," was whispered. "I can't help feeling all you say, and looking very weak and stupid now."

"Tease you, my own sweet!" cried Laura, swinging round to embrace in turn. "No, of course I won't. It's only my nasty envy, hatred and malice, because I can't be as happy as you. There—and there—and there!"

Three kisses, and Isabel started away.

"Fred's coming!" she whispered.

"No. That's auntie's soft, pudgy step. Fred comes down thump, thump, like a wooden-legged man."

"Laury!"

"Oh, well, he doesn't notice where he's going. He's always thinking of operations and that sort of thing. Good-morning, aunt dear."

"Good-morning, Isabel, my child—morning, Laura."

"Aren't you well, dear? You look so serious."

"Yes, Laura, I look serious. It's a sad world."

The girls exchanged glances, and with melancholy mien the old lady rang the bell for breakfast, and then dropped into her seat with a weary sigh.

"No letters, Laura?"

"No, aunt dear. There's a lovely rose instead."

"Thank you, Laura. Dear, dear! no one writes to me now. I don't know why one should go on living when one grows old."

"Because Fred and I want you, dear," cried Laura, merrily, "and Bel too. Put two more spoonfuls in the pot, aunt dear. A hot cup of tea will do you good."

"Nothing will ever do me good again," sighed the old lady, shaking her head mournfully.

"Oh yes, it will, dear; and Fred likes his tea strong."

"Yes, yes, very strong, my dear; and always preaches at me if I take it only just coloured. I sometimes think it's because he thinks I cost too much."

"Now, auntie, how can you?" cried Laura. "Don't you believe her, Bel."

"I do not," said the girl, smiling. "Poor aunt is not well this morning."

"How can I be, my child, knowing as I do that my little bit of property is slowly wasting away, and—"

"Here's the urn, aunt," cried Laura. "Shall I make the tea?"

"Certainly not, my dear. Let me, pray, enjoy the last few privileges of my age while I am here. I do not mean in this house, Isabel, my child, but living out my last weary span."

"Auntie darling," said Laura, tenderly, getting up as soon as the maid had placed tea-urn and covered dishes upon the table, "don't be so miserable this morning now that dear Bel is here," and she kissed the old lady lovingly.

"How can I help it, my child? It is her being here makes me feel so bad."

"Oh, my dear Mrs Crane!" cried Isabel.

"Worse and worse!" sobbed the old lady, melting into tears. "I did think you were softening to me, and would end by loving me and always calling me aunt—Mrs Crane!"

"Aunt—auntie! There!" cried Isabel, running to her and kissing her. "But I think it is I who ought to complain."

"Yes, my dear, you ought."

"You shouldn't say I make you bad."

"But you do, my dear. It's all on your account. It's dreadful, and I lay awake nearly all the night pitying you."

"Pitying me when I am so happy, auntie?" cried Isabel.

"Ah, my child! you don't know. All men are full of evil, but doctors are the worst of all."

"There, Bel; you are going to marry a horrid wretch," cried Laura.

"Don't scoff, my dear," continued the old lady. "It is too serious. They are always away from home—called at the most unearthly hours."

"Yes, to do good, auntie," said Isabel, smiling.

"And auntie won't do good when she might Aunt, Isabel and I are dying for some tea."

"Yes, yes, my dear; I'll pour it out directly."

"Wait a moment, aunt," cried Laura. "I'll go and ask Fred if he is coming down."

"Go and ask Fred, my dear? He is not at home."

"What!" cried the two girls in a breath.

"He has not come back yet. I lay awake hour after hour listening, with my door a little way open—I can hear the latch-key then—but—he did not come."

Laura glanced at her visitor, and saw trouble coming in her face like a cloud. "Oh, well, aunt, dear, it is not the first time."

"No, my dear," said the old lady, tightening her lips as she dropped a lump of sugar outside a cup; "it is not the first time by a long way, and I don't like it."

"Neither does Fred, I'm sure, poor fellow!" cried Laura, helping the ham and eggs. "It is some serious case, Bel dear, and he'll come back tired out for you to comfort him up. You'll often have it to do, for, poor boy, he is called out a great deal."

At that moment Aunt Grace let the sugar-tongs fall with a clatter among the cups, and burst into a fit of sobbing.

"Aunt dear!" cried Laura, jumping up to go to her side again; "what is the matter?"

"I don't like it, my dear. His being out like that."

"Well, Fred doesn't either."

"Ah, but that's it. He does, and it's horrible; and I will not sit still and see him deceive this poor, dear lamb."

"Mrs Crane!" cried Isabel, sitting up flushed with indignation.

"I can't help it, my dear. I should be a wicked woman if I did not speak. I watched last night, and I saw her. One of those horridly handsome, fashionable-looking ladies, and she carried him off just as if she were leading him by a chain. I can't help it! I had a presentiment then, and I'm obliged to speak. He hasn't come back, and I felt he would not, and as sure as I'm alive he'll never come back again."

"Aunt!" cried Laura, passionately. "Shame—Bel dear, don't take any notice of her."

But her words had no effect. Isabel had risen with her face scarlet, then turning white as her lips parted to utter an indignant rebuke.

No words came, and covering her face with her hand she hurried out of the room.

"Auntie!" cried Laura, passionately. "See what you've done. You're right. It's quite time you made up your mind to die."

Chapter Six.

In Danger.

As Chester turned and gazed in his patient's face, he felt that all was over: and at that moment Paddy, startled by Marion's excited words, rushed across and caught his arm.

"Is he going?"

"Yes," cried Marion, passionately, "and he has been murdered. Rob, Rob, my own darling, don't, don't leave me here to this! Rob! I cannot bear it! Dr Chester! for pity's sake! Oh, do something! Help!"

"Hush! You are hindering me," said Chester, sternly—himself once more. "The brandy! You—you—madam, use your fan rapidly. Is there no air to be got into this wretched prison? That's right. Raise his head a little more. That's better. Be calm, both of you. Everything depends upon that."

"But he is dying—he is dying!" wailed Marion.

"Be silent, madam, and obey my orders," whispered Chester, angrily, and the desperate fight went on. Desperate indeed it seemed to the doctor, and he fought as he had never fought before. But for some time every breath the poor fellow drew, feebly and painfully, seemed to her who watched him, with staring eyes, his very last.

They were alone with him for quite an hour, before the old housekeeper came in, to grasp at once what was wrong, and hurry to the couch.

"Oh, my child, why did you not ring for me?" she cried.

"Hush! Silence!" said the doctor, sternly. "The paroxysm has exhausted itself. With perfect quiet he may yet live."

His hand was caught by Marion and passionately kissed, before she sank, half-fainting, in the old housekeeper's arms.

Paddy went in and out on tip-toe, his action suggesting always that he was doing something in silence for a wager; and twice over his brother came in as the hours slipped past, but only to be sternly ordered to go by the doctor, who was then alone with Marion and the wounded man.

"But hang it all, sir!" he protested, "am I not to do what I like in my own house?"

"No, not while I am in charge of my patient."

"But—"

"Look here, sir, I will not be answerable for his life if you stay," whispered Chester, sharply.

The intruder bit his lips and glanced at Marion, then at the doctor and back. There was a world of meaning in his eyes, but Chester was too dreamy then to interpret it, and the man went away, but only for the far door to be re-opened and Paddy to make his appearance.

Marion uttered a sign of annoyance, and hurried to meet him.

"You must not stay, Paddy," she whispered. "It is so important that Robert should be kept quiet."

"All right," he said. "I didn't want to come, but Jem sent me. He doesn't like your being alone with the doctor."

An angry frown darkened Marion's face.

"Go," she said firmly. "Paddy, I think he will live now."

"Thank God!" cried the young fellow, fervently. "But, I say, if I go I'm pretty sure that Jem will come himself. He as good as said so."

"Stop him, then, and tell him to go to his wife."

Paddy shrugged his shoulders.

"You know what he is."

"Yes," said Marion, bitterly, "I know what he is," and she pointed towards the couch. "We know what he is. Now go."

"All right; but you want something. They've got some dinner or supper yonder; come and have a bit."

"No."

"Then I'll have some sent in."

"I don't want anything. Tell them to send something for the doctor."

But almost as she spoke the door was softly opened, and the old housekeeper appeared with a tray.

One long dream, in a strangely protracted night, as it appeared to Chester—a night in which the world seemed to be halting during a singular delirium. Time stood still apparently for both nurse and doctor, who hardly left the room, but were waited on by the housekeeper and the two ladies, who came in and out softly, each offering to take Marion's place; but she invariably refused.

Nature grew stern at times towards the watchers at the wounded man's side, and sometimes one, sometimes the other, sank suddenly into a deep sleep, during which, whether it were one hour or many, the other remained perfectly awake and watchful.

And day after day, night after night, the dual fight went on—the fight with death and that with honour. There were times when Fred Chester seemed to be winning in both encounters, but as often he felt that his patient was slowly slipping away from him, as he himself was lapsing from all that he ought to have held dear.

Everything was, in the latter case, against him. Forced into close contact with the woman who had so strangely influenced him from the first moment of their meeting, with her eyes constantly seeking his appealingly as the sufferer's life rose and fell—flickering like the flame of an expiring candle, he felt that his position was too hard for man to bear. He owned himself weak, pitiful and contemptible, but as he struggled on he felt himself drifting hopelessly away, and that, come what might, he was to become this woman's slave.

One day was like that which followed, in its wild delirium and strangeness. Chester had almost lost count of the time which had elapsed, and grew startled at last as the feeling was impressed upon him that the precautions taken by those around had grown unnecessary and that if the door had stood open he would not now have attempted to escape. A strange thrall held him more than locks and bars, and he was ready to sacrifice everything to stay there by Marion's side and fight the grim Shade till it was defeated and he had won her gratitude and love.

The great trouble Chester had to fight was the succession of strange convulsive fits which attacked his patient, each of which seemed to have snapped the frail thread which held the wounded man to life; but as they passed off the flame flickered up again, and the struggle recommenced.

At last came the day when, hopeless and despondent, Chester bent over to dress the wound, feeling that the struggle had been all in vain, and that his skill was far less than he had believed.

The old housekeeper was waiting upon him, and Marion had, at his request, gone to the other end of the room.

"You unnerve me," he whispered.

She looked at him reproachfully, and went away without a word, to seat herself with her arm on the side of a chair, her hand supporting her brow.

As a rule, the sufferer had made no sign during the opening and rebandaging, but this time he winced sharply at every touch, and the old housekeeper looked up questioningly.

"Is that a bad sign?" she whispered, with her face all drawn and ghastly with fear.

"No; a sign of greater vitality," said Chester, quickly, and the next minute he uttered a curious sibilation, for in removing the inner bandage, his fingers came in contact with something angular and hard, which he held up to the light and examined carefully.

A quick, sharp breathing at his ear made him start round, to find that his every movement had been watched between the fingers of the hand which covered the watcher's face, and she had hurried to his side.

"Worse?" she whispered faintly, too much exhausted now to display the intense agony and excitement of the earlier days of their intercourse.

"No," he cried triumphantly. "Here is the cause—the enemy which has been fighting against us so long, and produced, I believe, those terrible convulsive attacks."

Marion looked at him wonderingly, and her lips parted, but no words came. He read the question, though, in her eyes.

"I ought to have known, and found it out sooner," Chester said bitterly, "and I feel that I am only a miserable pretender, after all. This piece of jagged lead, broken from the conical bullet by the explosion; it has remained behind causing all the trouble."

"Ah! Then he will recover now?"

"Yes," he said, as his eyes met hers; and if was some moments before they were withdrawn, both, in the pre-eminence of self at that moment, having taken no thought of the old housekeeper, who involuntarily made her presence known by uttering a deep sigh; and as Marion started and met her gaze, the old woman shook her head at her reproachfully.

"Oh, my dear! my dear!" she said softly; "pray, pray think."

Marion's brow contracted, and she walked slowly away, to take up her former position; while Chester winced and gave the old woman an angry look, as she now shook her head sadly at him.

"No, doctor, no," she said softly; "that could never be. Please think only of your patient and your position of trust."

"How dare you, woman!" he whispered angrily; for her words had gone home, and stung him more deeply than she could have realised.

"Because I am not like an ordinary servant, doctor," she said, meeting his eyes unflinchingly. "I nursed her when she was a little child, and I have watched over her ever since. Yes, she is very beautiful, but that could never be."

Chester bent over his patient with knitted brow and tightly-compressed lips, feeling the truth of the old woman's words, and ready to repeat them again mentally—that could never be.

His hands were busy with his task, and his brain was more active than ever, as he felt now that he had won this victory, and that the effort to bring the poor fellow back to life and strength would now be an easy one; little more than good nursing would suffice. Why, then, could he not win in that other fight? She was right; that could never be; and he seemed now to be suffering a rude awakening from the strange, dreamy time through which he had passed—awakening to the fact that he had lapsed into a faithless scoundrel, he who had believed himself all that was manly and true.

An hour before, he had felt that nothing could drag him from Marion's side. He loved her more than he could have believed possible, but it could never be. He was awake once more, and now that the peril was past he must go.

"Hah!" he said softly, as he finished his task and the old housekeeper rose to bear away sponge, basin and towel, "head cooler, more susceptible of touch. A hard fight, but I win. An error of judgment? No; I did all possible. The probe revealed nothing. I saw no bullet, or I might have known."

Everything else had passed away for the moment in the pride of his satisfaction—the triumph of life over death—and he stood with one hand resting on the back of the couch, the other upon his left hip, as he bent over his patient, whose breath came softly, and there was a restful look in the thin white face.

Then he started round, for there was a light touch upon his arm, and he was face to face with Marion once more, her head bent forward, her wild eyes searching his.

"Is—is it true?" she whispered excitedly. "She told me as she went out—you did not speak."

"Yes; quite true," cried Chester. "No wonder, poor fellow, that he made no advance. But there, we have won, and a day or two's nursing will be all he wants. Now you can feel at rest."

"Feel—at rest?"

"Of course; there is no disease. Weakness is the only trouble now."

"Weakness the only trouble now! Rob—Rob—my own dear boy!"

She sank upon her knees, and as he saw her action, Chester tried to check her. But she gave him a reproachful glance, and passed her soft white arms about the patient's head, but without touching him; and the loving kiss she breathed, as it were, upon his lips. Then she rose, sobbing gently, with all the strength of her mind and force of action seeming to have passed away, as with outstretched hands she caught at the nearest object to save herself from falling.

That nearest object was Chester; and the next moment she was weeping in his arms.

"You have given him back to me," she sobbed, her voice little above a whisper. "You have saved him. How can I ever repay you for what you have done?"

The minute before he had been strong; now as he felt the sobs rising from the labouring breast, and clasped her throbbing, palpitating form closer and—closer,—"Marion!"

Her name—nothing more; but he felt her tremble in his arms and hang more heavily as her head sank slowly back, bringing her lips nearer his; and the next moment she uttered a low sigh, breathed in their lengthened kiss.

"Out of what comedy is this, doctor?" said a harsh, familiar voice; and as they started angrily apart, Jem, as they called him, advanced quickly from the silently opened door, straight towards Marion, upon whom he fixed his fierce eyes, as he spoke to her companion. "French, I suppose—a translation. I congratulate you, doctor—both of you. It was so real—so passionately grand. And you," he literally hissed now, "most loving sister! *Pour passer le temps*, of course. The *ennui* of long nursing. Curse you!" he whispered savagely, as he stopped before her, and with a quick movement caught her by the wrist.

The next moment he uttered a hoarse cry of rage, for, stung to madness by the brutal act, Chester sprang at him, forcing him back over the table before which he stood, while Marion was flung aside.

Chapter Seven.

A Black Cloud Behind.

"Where am I?"

Head throbbing horribly, a nauseous taste in the mouth, throat constricted and painful upon an attempt to swallow, and a strange mental confusion which provoked the above question.

The answer came at once.

In a miserable, musty-smelling, four-wheeled cab, whose windows were drawn up, and so spattered with mud and the heavy rain which fell upon the roof that the gleam from the street lamps only produced a dim, hazy light within, as the vehicle jangled slowly along, with wheels and some loose piece of iron rattling loudly in concert with the beat of the horse's feet.

"Whatever am I doing here?" was Fred Chester's next question.

Lying back in the corner, in an awkward position, as if in a state of collapse, and only saved from subsiding into the bottom of the cab by his feet being propped up on the front cushion, the doctor kept perfectly still trying to think, but every retrogressive attempt gave the idea that he was gazing at a vast black cloud which completely shut out the past.

He uttered a faint groan, for he felt startled; but after lying back listening to the beating rain and the jarring of the ill-fitting glasses, he recovered somewhat.

"How absurd!" he muttered. "Where am I going? Ask the driver."

He drew up his legs and let his feet drop into the cab, as he tried to sit up, but the effort gave him the sensation of molten lead running from one of his temples to the other, and he lay perfectly still while the agonising pain passed slowly away, trying hard to think what had happened, but in vain. There was the black cloud before him mentally, though he could see the gleaming of a lamp he passed through the blurred panes of glass.

At last, feeling more and more startled by his condition, he made a brave effort, raised himself upright, and reached out for the strap, so as to lower the front window; but at the first movement he was seized with a sickening giddiness, lurched forward, and thrust himself back to recline in the corner again till the molten lead had ceased to flow from side to side of his head.

At last, very slowly and cautiously, bit by bit, he edged himself forward till his knees rested against the front cushion, and then, thrusting one hand into the left corner, he reached out for the strap, raised the window, and let it glide sharply and loudly down.

"Hi! Cabby!" he cried hoarsely.

"Right, sir!" came back, and the cab was drawn up by the kerb beneath the next street lamp.

Then the driver got down and opened the door, to stand with the rain streaming off his waterproof hat and cape.

"Mornin', sir," he said in a husky voice, closely following a chuckle. "Feel better now?"

"No, I am horribly ill. Where am I?"

"Why, here, sir," said the man, chuckling. "My word, it's a wet 'un outside."

"But what street's this?"

"Halkin Street, Belgrave Square, sir."

"What? But how came I in your cab?—I can't remember."

"S'pose not, sir," said the man, good-humouredly. "Does make yer feel a bit muzzy till yer've had another snooze. Shall I try and find one o' the early purlers where the market-garden chaps goes?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"Drop o' somethin' to clear your head, sir—and keep some o' the wet out o' me."

"But—but I don't understand you," cried Chester, whose head still throbbed so that he dreaded losing his senses again.

"Oh, it's all right, sir. Have a drop o' something; you'll be better then."

"But how came I in your cab?"

"Your friend and me put you there, sir."

"My friend?"

"Yes, him as you'd been dining with, sir; on'y you don't seem to ha' heat much."

"My friend?"

"Yes, sir; that's right."

"Where was it?"

"Pickydilly Circus; 'bout three hours ago."

"Yes—yes. Well?"

"And he says, 'Take care of him, kebbly,' he says, 'and drive him home. Bad cham,' he says, 'and he ain't used to it.'"

"Then why didn't you drive me home?" cried Chester, angrily.

"S'elp me! I like that!—I did; and no one was sittin' up for yer; I knocked and rung for 'bout arf an hour before the old chap shoved up the winder and began a-cussin' and a-swearin' at me awful."

"What old chap?" faltered Chester in his amaze.

"Your old guv'nor, I s'pose; and he wouldn't come down, and told me to drive you to the 'oh no, we never mentions him!' for you warn't coming in there. Then he bangs down the winder, and I waited ten minutes for him to get cool, and then knocks and rings again. This time he shoves up the winder and swears he'd shoot at me if I warn't off; and as I got set agen 'orspittles ever since I was there for two months, I got up on the box again and drove off, for there was a bobby coming up; and I've been driving you about ever since."

"Driving me about ever since?"

"That's so, sir. We've been round Belgrave Square about a dozen times, and I was just going to drive you back to our stables, where it ain't quite so wet, when you downed the window."

"I can't grasp it," said Chester, hoarsely.

"Oh, never you mind about that, sir; you'll be all right soon. You see, beggin' your pardon, you was precious tight, and your friend had all he could do to hold you up. 'Just like a jelly, kebbly,' he says; and you was, sir. Your legs doubled up like a two-foot rule with a weak jynte."

"My friend!" cried Chester, snatching at that as something to cling to. "Who was that?"

"That's what I'm a-telling you, sir. Your friend—"

"But what sort of a person was it?"

"Big, stout young fellow, like a Lifeguardsman, but a real gent. Very jovial sort. 'Take great keer of him, kebbly,' he says, and he tipped me a quid. 'Help him up the steps when you get him home.' 'Right you are, sir,' I says, as soon as I'd shut you up. 'But wheer to?' 'Thirty-three Chrissal Square, Chelsea,' he says, and there I drove you, and there you'd be, only your guv'nor cut up so rough."

"Chrissal Square, Chelsea?" cried Chester, eagerly.

"That's it, sir."

"Why didn't he tell you Raybeck Square?"

"Dunno, I'm sure, sir. That's where all the doctors is."

"Yes, of course."

"Didn't think you was bad enough, I s'pose, sir. And you ain't. You on'y want a drop to clear your head a bit."

"Drive me to Raybeck Square, thirty-four, at once."

"Won't you have a drop of something first, sir? Do you more good than going to a doctor's, and me, too."

"No, no, absurd. But one moment. You said Piccadilly Circus?"

"That's right, sir."

"And my friend helped me into the cab, and paid you to drive me home?"

"That's it, sir. You're getting it now—all by heart."

"A tall, stout gentleman?"

"Well, not exactly that, sir. I don't mean a fat 'un with a big weskit. A reg'lar strong-built un."

"I can't grasp it," muttered Chester. Then aloud,—“But why did he tell you to drive me to the wrong house?”

"Bit on too, sir. Arter dinner. Did it for a lark, p'ra'ps."

"Drive me home," said Chester, sinking back. "I can't recollect a bit."

"Course you can't, sir. Better have a hair o' the dog as bit you."

"No, no. There, I'll give you a glass of brandy when we get back."

"Suppose your guv'nor won't let you in, sir?"

"Nonsense, man. I have a latch-key."

"Wish I'd ha' knowed it," muttered the man, as he tried to close the door; "blessed if I wouldn't ha' picked your pocket of it and risked it I'd ha' carried you into the passage, and chanced it. Blister the door, how it sticks!" he growled, as he banged it to, the jerk raising the glass, and it dropped down. "Chrissal Square, sir?"

"No, no, Raybeck Square; and make haste out of the rain."

"Oh, I'm as wet as I can be, sir, and it don't matter now," grumbled the man, as he ascended to the box, and once more the maddening rattle and jangle began.

Chester's head was as blank as ever with regard to the past when the cab drew up at his home, but it was perfectly clear as to the present, and he was still hard at work trying to make out where he had been dining, with whom, and how it was possible for him to have so far forgotten himself as to have drunk till he was absolutely imbecile, when the man opened the door.

"One moment; my latch-key. Yes; all right, I said I'd give you a glass of brandy."

"You did, sir, and welkum it'll be as the flowers o' May. Jump out quick, sir, and run up the steps, for it's all one big shower bath."

"Can you leave your horse?"

"Leave him, sir?" said the man, with a chuckle; "for a month. He's got hoofs like hanchors. But I will hitch his nose-bag on, and let him see if he can find that there oat he was a-'untin' for in the chaff last time he had it on."

The next minute Chester was inside, with his head throbbing; but he was not so giddy, and his first glance was at the hall clock, illumined by the half turned down gas.

"Four o'clock," he muttered. "How strange!"

"May I come inside, sir? Horse'll be all right if there don't come a bobby prowling round. If he ain't a fool he'll be under someone's doorway, for there ain't likely to be no burgling a time like this."

"Shut the door, and come in here," said Chester, shortly; and he led the way into his consulting-room, turned up the gas, and from a closet took a decanter and glass, filled the latter for the cabman, who was making a pool on the thick carpet, and then poured himself out a few drops from a small-stoppered bottle, added some water from a table filter, and tossed off the mixture.

"Thank you, sir, and hope that there'll do you as much good as this here's done me a'ready. Didn't know you was a doctor."

"Here's a crown for you," said Chester, taking the money from a little drawer.

"Five bob! Oh, thank ye, sir," said the man, with a grin. "Makes a fellow feel quite dry. Sorry for your carpet, sir. Good-mornin'. I don't think I want another fare."

As the door was closed after the man, the potent drops Chester had taken began to have some effect, and it seemed as if the dawn was coming through the black cloud which separated him mentally from what had taken place overnight.

"The man's right," he muttered. "I must sleep. Good heavens! What a state my brain is in!"

"Is that you, Fred?"

He started as if he had been stung, and the dawn brightened as he replied sharply—

"Yes, aunt; all right. Go to bed. Why are you up?"

There was no reply, and he turned the hall light nearly out again, and went into his consulting-room to serve the gas jet there the same, and sank into an easy-chair instead; but he had hardly allowed himself to sink back when he sprang up again, for there, in the open doorway, stood the grotesque figure of Aunt Grace, in broad-frilled, old-fashioned night-cap and dressing-gown, a flat candlestick in her hand, and a portentous frown upon her brow, as she walked straight to him, wincing sharply as one slippered foot was planted in the pool left by the cabman, but continuing her slow, important march till she was about a yard away from her nephew, when she stopped.

"Why, aunt," he cried, "what's the matter? Surely you are not walking in your sleep!"

"Matter?" she cried in a low, deep voice, full of the emotion which nearly choked her. "Oh, you vile, wicked, degraded boy! How dare you treat your poor sister and me like this?"

"Pooh! Hush! Nonsense, old lady. It's all right. I've been dining with a friend."

"With a friend!" she said, with cutting sarcasm.

"Yes, at his club. There, I must have been unwell. I was a little overdone. What a terrible night."

"Terrible indeed, sir, when my nephew stoops to lie to me like that. A friend—at his club! Do you think me such a baby that I do not know you have been with that abandoned woman?"

"Hush! Silence!" he whispered angrily. "For your dear, dead father's and mother's sake, sir, I will not be silenced."

"But you will arouse Laura."

"She wants no arousing. She is lying ill in bed, sleepless in her misery, sir, with her wretched brother staying out like this."

"Confound you for a silly old woman!" he cried angrily. "Is a man to live the life of a hermit? If I had been away to a patient till breakfast-time nobody would have said a word. Poor little Laury! But how absurd!"

"Absurd, sir!" cried the old lady, who was scarlet with indignation. "Then I suppose it was absurd for poor Isabel Lee to have gone home broken-hearted because of your conduct."

"What!" he cried, springing up, with a glimmer of memory coming back. "Why, surely you two did not canvass my being out one night till the poor girl was so upset that she—that she—went back—yes, she was stopping here. Oh, aunt, your foolish, suspicious ways are disgraceful. What have you done?"

"I done, you wretched boy? It's what have you done? She was with us for a whole week after you had gone, fighting against me, and insisting that there was a reason for your being away, or that you had had an accident."

"Here, aunt, are you going to be ill?" he cried, catching at her wrist; but she snatched it away.

"Don't touch me, sir!" she cried. "Oh, Fred, Fred! I'd have given the world not to know that you were so wicked. And just when you were about to marry her, poor girl, to go away as you did."

"Go away—as I did?" he faltered, gazing at her blankly.

"Yes, I knew something was wrong when I saw that wretched woman's face. I felt it; but I could not have believed you would be so base. A whole fortnight too; and to think that this was to have been your wedding-day!"

He caught her by the shoulders, and she uttered a faint cry and dropped the candlestick, as he stood swaying to and fro, staring at the doorway, through which his sister hesitatingly passed, and came slowly toward him.

"A fortnight!" he stammered—"Isabel gone!"

"Yes, gone—gone for ever," said Laura, sadly. "Oh, Fred, how could you?"

"Stop! Don't touch me," he cried angrily. "Don't speak to me. Let me try to think."

He threw his head back and shook it violently in his effort to clear it, but the confusion and mental darkness began to close in once more, while the throbbing in his brain grew agonising. It was as if his head were opening and shutting—letting the light in a little and then blotting it out; till he felt his senses reeling—the present mingling with the darkness of the past he strove so vainly to grasp.

"I can't think. Am I going mad?" he groaned, as he staggered to a chair.

"Mad, indeed," said his aunt, bitterly. "Come away, Laura, and leave him to his conscience. Better if it had been as you and poor Isabel thought—that he had met with some accident, and was dead."

She caught her niece by the arm, but Laura shook herself free and took a step or two towards where, in his utter despair, Chester sat bent down with his head resting in his hands. But he made no movement, and with a bitter sob she turned and followed her aunt from the room.

Chapter Eight.

“Whither?”

It was a good forty-eight hours before Chester could think clearly. His aunt had sternly avoided his room, and he had been dependent upon Laura, who attended him as he lay quite prostrated by the agonising pains in his head. She hardly spoke, but saw to his wants as a sisterly duty, and felt that silent reproach was better than words to one who had proved himself such a profligate.

“I can’t understand it,” she said to herself again and again. “It is so unlike him. If he would only repent, poor Bel might forgive him—in time. No; I cannot speak to him yet.”

She little thought how her brother blessed her for her silence, as he lay struggling to get behind that black curtain; but all in vain.

He was sleeping heavily on the third night, when he suddenly woke up with the mental congestion gone. The pain had passed away, and his brain felt clear and bright once more.

He remembered perfectly now. The scene with Marion after his triumphant declaration of all danger being past. Their embrace. The interruption by the coming of the saturnine head of the house, and the struggle, all came back vividly clear, and with photographic minuteness. He recalled, too, how in the encounter when he had forced his adversary back over the edge of the table, he felt that an effort was being made to get at some weapon.

Then the great athletic brother came and separated them, remonstrating on the folly of the encounter at such a time.

“How strange that I can remember it all so clearly now,” muttered Chester. “Yes, he said that it was over a dispute. He would not acknowledge the real cause, and she did not speak. The scoundrel; he had been persecuting her with his addresses. I see now; that must have been the cause of the first trouble. Her brother was defending her from him.”

Then he recalled how the pair went away, and that the old housekeeper stayed, while Marion sat by the patient’s side, avoiding his gaze, and as if repenting that she had given way to her feelings.

A tray was brought in by Paddy, so that the housekeeper should not leave the room; and he stopped, talking good-temperedly enough, for some little time, and almost playing the part of servant to them, till they had all partaken scantily of the excellent meal; but he did not have another opportunity of speaking to Marion alone.

Chester lay for some minutes trembling then, for he had been growing excited by the recollections, and a strange dread had come over him that he was about to lose his memory again; but the adventures of that night came back, and he recalled the coming of Paddy once more. This time he brought in a tray with coffee and four cups, which he filled and handed to each of those present. Yes, Chester remembered how the housekeeper refused, and Paddy spoke—

“Nonsense, old lady! take it; we can’t stand on ceremony now, you may have to be up for hours.”

Then the old housekeeper took the cup, and the young man sugared his own coffee very liberally, and added plenty of cream.

“Bad taste, doctor,” he said good-humouredly, “but I like it sweet. So you feel now that poor Bob will be all right?”

“Yes, I have no doubt of it.”

“Thanks to you,” said the young man, and he advanced and took Chester’s emptied cup, and then Marion’s, soon after leaving the room with the tray.

Chester recalled feeling a little drowsy after this, and then in a dreamy way seeing Marion with her brow resting upon the patient’s pillow.

No more—try how he would, Chester could recollect nothing else, but consideration filled up the gap. The elder brother, satisfied that the patient’s life was saved, was desirous of ridding the house of the doctor’s presence, the more so now that he had discovered the relations which had sprung up between him and Marion.

“The scoundrel!” thought Chester. “That must have been it: he was pursuing her, and the brother was shot down in defending his sister.”

Chester shivered now, and his brain grew hot, as he saw clearly enough all that remained. The cups had been prepared, two of them containing a drug, and Paddy had taken care that they should go to those for whom they were intended. It was all plain enough. Paddy was working in his brother’s interest, and he was the big friend who had taken him first to the Circus, and then placed him in another cab, with instructions to the man.

“Well,” muttered Chester, “I see my way now, and I am not going to sit down calmly over the matter. I must—I will see her again.”

Then he trembled, and the hot burning sensation came once more. But it passed off, and he felt that he must be calm and wait till he had another long sleep, when he hoped to be quite restored.

He lay trying now to forget all that had passed, so as to rest for a while; but sleep would not come, and he could do nothing but dwell upon his adventures at that mysterious house. It was so strange. The servants had evidently been sent away, so that they might know nothing of what threatened for long enough to prove a murder. He wanted to know of none other cause for the quarrel. His patient must have been shot down while defending his sister from some insult offered by the clever, overbearing, unprincipled scoundrel who seemed to lord it over all.

And as Chester lay thinking, an intense desire came over him to learn more of the family who had literally imprisoned him, and kept him there all those days. When there, it had seemed for the most part like some romantic dream; and as

he lay now at home thinking, the vague intangibility of those nights and days appeared to him more fanciful and strange than ever; so much so, that there were moments when he was ready to ask himself whether, after all, it was not the result of imagination.

He recalled all the actors in the little social drama—the men whom he had seen on the first night, and who dropped out of sight afterwards; the two ladies—the wives of the brothers—both quiet, startled-looking women, of the type that would be seen exhibiting the latest fashions at some race, at Lord's, or at a meeting of the Four-in-Hand Club, and evidently slaves of their husbands—and he recalled now how the wife of the elder brother seemed to hold her lord in dread.

"There's something more about that place than one knows," Chester thought to himself as he turned from side to side, "and I cannot—I will not, sit down and patiently bear such treatment. To-morrow I'll go and demand an explanation. I have a good excuse," he said half aloud and with a bitter laugh; "there is my promised fee, and—Pish!" he exclaimed savagely. "If I am to prove a scoundrel, I will be an honest one. I will ferret out who and what they are. I behaved like a child in not having some explanation earlier—in yielding passively as I did without reason—no, not without reason. I could not help it. Heaven help me! I will—I must see her again. It is fate!"

He jumped up in bed, for a sudden thought now sent a chill of horror through him, as for the first time the drugging which had taken place showed itself in another light.

"To get rid of me," he muttered, as the great drops of sweat gathered on his face, "and—the last thing I remember—Marion—her head fallen upon the couch beside her brother, helpless now to protect her—drugged, insensible, at the mercy of that villain; and I here without stirring or raising a hand."

Some little time later, feeling weak and faint, he was standing in the hall reaching down his hat, and for a moment he had a feeling of compunction. Isabel—his sister—what would they think of his strange, base infatuation?

"What they will," he said between his teeth. "Placed in such circumstances, no man could be master of himself. I must save her, even if we never meet again;" and the door closed after him loudly, as, half mad now with excitement, Marion's eyes seeming to lure him on, he stepped out into the darkness of the night.

"Whither?" he muttered, as he hurried across the Square. "Heaven help me! it is my fate."

Chapter Nine.

A Blacker Cloud In Front.

The nearest church clock was striking three as Chester passed into the great west-end artery, which was almost deserted, and he had been walking rapidly, under the influence of his strange excitement, for some minutes before, clear as his head was now, he found himself brought up short by a mental cloud as black and dense as that from which he had suffered when he began to recover from the influence of the drug he had taken.

But there was this difference: the dense obscurity then was relating to the past—this was connected with the future.

"Good heavens!" he muttered. "Whatever he gave me must be acting still; I am half delirious. I am no longer master of my actions. Why am I here? What am I going to do?—To try to save her, for she is at his mercy. But how?"

He stopped short, literally aghast at the horror which encompassed him as he felt that he was utterly helpless.

How was he to save Marion? How take the place of the brother who had defended her and fallen? Where was she?

In the great wilderness of houses which made up the overgrown city in which he dwelt, where was the one he sought?

Utterly dazed, he stood trying to think out in which direction it lay, and moment by moment his feeling of utter helplessness increased.

He had not taken the slightest note of the direction in which the carriage was driven that night, for he had sat listening to his excited companion, half wondering at the way in which he was influenced by her presence.

The carriage, he did remember, was driven very fast, but it must have been at least a quarter of an hour before it was drawn up at the kerb before the old-fashioned mansion.

Yes, he did note that old-fashioned mansion, in a wide street, too—it must have been a wide street to have allowed for so great a distance between the kerb and the two steps up from the pavement; and the house stood back, too, some distance.

That was something, but a chill of despair came over him as he felt that these features applied to thousands of houses.

Still, it was old-fashioned, and the hall was wide, just such a house as he would find in Bloomsbury.

"Or Westminster," he muttered. "But the cabman was told to drive to Chelsea. A blind to confuse me, on the chance that I did not notice when I was brought there that night.

"Bloomsbury or Westminster," he said to himself; "and chance or instinct may help me," he mused, as, feeble as was the clue, he felt that it was something to act upon, something to give him work that might deaden the wild excitement. He set off at once in the direction of the old-fashioned, grim-looking streets half a mile east of where he had stood thinking, ending by taking a passing cab, for he felt faint and bathed in a cold perspiration, and being driven slowly through street and square till long after daylight, and then home, sick at heart in the despondent feeling which came over him.

"It's hopeless—impossible," he said to himself, as he wearily let himself in with his latch-key, while the cabman drove slowly off, saying—

"Not bad, as things go. Talk about seeing life, I think we kebbies do. Why, that chap must be about cracked."

As Chester threw his overcoat on a chair in the hall, a slight rustling on the stairs took his attention.

"Watched!" he said to himself, while turning into his consulting-room, feeling convinced that either Laura or his aunt had been listening for his return.

"They must think me mad," he said, and after a pause, "are they right?"

He was calmer now, and his mind running in this direction, he could not help feeling there was a strange dash of insanity mingled with his actions since the night when he was called out, and that this last act of hunting through the streets for a house of whose location he was utterly ignorant seemed nearly the culminating point.

"Yes, the height of folly," he said softly. "I must try and devise some means of finding her. Chance may help me. I can do no more now."

He rose with the intention of going up to his bedroom, but the sun was now shining brightly, and he opened the shutters before returning to his seat to try and think out some clue which he could follow up.

The light which flooded the room seemed to brighten his intellect, and in spite of the use to which he had put the latter part of the past night, his head felt cool and clear.

"Let's look the position fairly in the face," he said to himself. "After all, I have done Isabel no substantial wrong; I was not a free agent. I could not return; and that course is open, to go to her and to her people, frankly explain, and make up to her by my future for the weak lapse of which I have been guilty. For what are these people to me?"

He sat back with his brow knit, feeling, though, that such a course was impossible—that he could not go and humble himself before his betrothed, and that it would be an act of base and cruel hypocrisy to resume their old relations when his heart seemed to have but one desire—to see Marion again.

"No, it is impossible!" he cried angrily. "It was not love. I never could have loved her. Heaven help me! What shall I do? Some clue—some clue!"

He started mentally again from the moment when he was called down to see his visitor, and he seemed to see her once more, standing close by the table—just there! Then he once more entered the brougham with her and tried to get some gleam of the direction they took, but he could only recall that the horses were standing with their heads toward the east. No more. The result was precisely the same as it had been at other times, utterly negative. He had thought of nothing but his companion till they reached the house, and he had not even the clue of the family name.

Then a thought struck him, and he brightened up. Those moments when, after his vain search for the bullet, he had dressed the wound. She had prepared bandages for him, and with eager fingers now he thrust his hand into his breast-pocket for his pocket-book, opened it, and took out a closely-folded, very fine cambric handkerchief, deeply stained with blood. She had given it to him, and he held it to the wound for a few minutes, while a bandage was torn, and had afterwards thrust it into his breast, only in his ecstasy to later on, unseen, take it out, carefully fold it, and place it in one of the pockets of his little Russia case.

His hands trembled as he opened it out and examined the corners, the fourth showing, carefully embroidered, the letters M.E.C.

He had hoped for the full name in marking ink, and with a faint sigh he refolded the delicate piece of fabric, and replaced it in his pocket-book, to sit thinking once more, with the new cloud growing blacker.

There was one way, he thought—the police. Some shrewd officer might make something out of this narrative and trace the house; but he felt that it was doubtful, and shrank from laying bare a mystery which he felt sure Marion was eager to keep hidden. Finally he came to the conclusion that he would know no rest until he had discovered the place of his strange imprisonment himself, and in despair, to relieve the pressure of his brain, he turned to the writing-table, which was pretty well covered with letters from patients, complaining that they had come up to find him away; from others asking him to make appointments; and again others of a tendency which showed him that he was injuring his practice.

Lastly, he picked up a letter which he had put aside, unwilling to open it; and he held it for some minutes, gazing straight before him, thinking deeply, and seeming to lack the resolution to read.

At last with a sigh he tore it open.

It was from Isabel's mother, telling him that her child was heart-broken, and asking him to give some explanation of the cruel treatment to which they had been subjected.

"Let them think the truth," he cried passionately as he tore the letter into tiny fragments. "Let them think me half mad, I cannot—I dare not write."

There were two or three packets on the table, even then, and he winced as he turned them over. One was a bundle of proofs of an article he had written for a medical paper; the next was a carefully-sealed box, registered, and he threw it into a drawer with an angry ejaculation. It was from a jeweller, and contained a pearl bracelet he had bought as a present for his betrothed.

The other was also a box that had come by post, registered, and it was heavy. He did not know what that was; he had ordered no other present, and his curiosity being excited, he cut the green tape, tore off the great seals, and was in the act of opening the cartridge paper in which it was folded, when he stopped and snatched up the tape to which the sealing-wax adhered.

There were three seals, two the coarse splotches of common wax used by postal authorities; the other was fine and had been sealed with arms and crest, but a drop from the coarse postal wax had half covered it and Chester could make nothing of the sender.

The box within was fastened down with brads, and he forced it open with some curiosity, to find a heavy packet of what seemed to be short, thick pieces of pipe, and with a vague idea that they were connected with some surgical instrument sent to him from the maker on trial, he pushed it aside impatiently, and threw himself back in his chair.

The next minute the thought occurred to him that a surgical instrument maker would not seal the packet with armorial bearings, and he would have sent some communication, so, catching up the box, he drew out the carefully-done-up packet within, tore it open, and then let his hands fall on the table, for the contents were rouleaux of sovereigns, all bright and fresh from the mint, the number written upon the packet—"210 pounds." Two hundred guineas—the fee promised to him for his services.

"Gentlemanly and honourable in this, after all," he said to himself; and he eagerly searched the papers to see if there was a note.

None, and with an ejaculation of disappointment he unlocked the table drawer, thrust in the rouleaux, locked them up, and then caught up the pieces of green tape again, to examine the blurred red seal.

"Eureka!" he muttered; "then here is the clue." He carefully cut off the seal and placed it in his pocket-book, after satisfying himself that the crest over the shield of armorial bearings was a mailed arm bent, the elbow only being clear. With this to guide him, he went to a book-case, and took down a Peerage, in the faint hope of finding the arms of some great family there; and he was still vainly searching when the servant knocked at the door to tell him that breakfast was ready.

Laura and his aunt were waiting in the dining-room, and their salute was a formal "Good-morning," after which the breakfast was partaken of in silence, and he rose to go back to his room.

"Will you see your patients this morning, Frederick?" said his aunt, as he reached the door.

He looked back at her sharply, and then glanced at his sister, who was watching him too.

"No," he said sharply. "I have important business—I am going out."

"But—"

Chester closed the door and hurried to his room. He knew what was about to be said, and he was in such an intense state of irritation, that he could not trust himself to reply, but took hat and coat directly, went out, and jumping into the first cab was driven to his club, where he spent the morning in the library, examining books on landed gentry, peerages, baronetages, everything he could find relating to armorial bearings, and finding crest after crest of mailed arms holding swords, daggers, spears, flowers, plumes, hearts, and arrows, but nothing which quite answered to the seal.

After a hasty lunch he went out to resume his search for the house, and for the next fortnight this was his life, seeking, and seeking in vain, for he found hundreds, each of which might very well have been that which he sought, till one afternoon he was walking down formal old streets of gloomy mansions, when his eyes lit upon a house, one of fifty almost alike, double-fronted with a broad entrance, and exactly what he felt the place must be that he sought. He had passed it a dozen times before, but it had never impressed him, and with a strange feeling of elation, as he noted its gloomy aspect, uncleaned windows, and air of neglect, he grew certain that he had made the discovery at last.

The next thing was to note the number and examine a Directory, and walking rapidly on without daring to look for fear of being observed, he went to the end of the street, crossed over, and returned, read the half-obliterated number on the time-worn door as he rapidly passed, and once more had himself driven to his club.

"Found at last," he muttered, as he opened the great Directory and found the number, and name, "Westcott."

Not much, but something within him made him feel that he was right, and he closed the book, drawing a deep breath, and went straight to the great grim street.

He had made no plans, but had determined upon a bold attack as the likeliest way of obtaining entrance. The old housekeeper would answer the door, and threats, cajoling, or bribery he was determined should be his pass-key, for see Marion and be assured of her safety he would, even, he told himself, if he had to use force.

For one moment only he hesitated before he plunged into the lion's jaws, as it were—should he speak to a policeman and tell him how to act if he did not soon return?

"No," he said; "it would be too cowardly, and I might injure her."

The next minute he had given a heavy peal on knocker and bell, listened to the hollow echoes raised within the forbidding place, and stood waiting for the opening of the door.

Chapter Ten.

The Bookworm at Home.

As Chester waited for an answer to his summons the thought of the awkwardness of his position struck him, but he was strung up and determined to go on with his quest at all hazards. At the end of a minute there was no reply, and he knocked and rang again, with the hope rising that he was on the right tack at last, for the silence accorded with the mystery of the place he sought.

It was not until he had roused the echoes within the house for the third time that he heard the rattle of a chain being

taken down; then the door was opened slowly, and Chester's heart sank as he found himself face to face with a dim-eyed, sleepy-looking old man, thin, stooping, and untidy of aspect, in his long, dusty dressing-gown and slippers. He was wearing an old-fashioned pair of round glass, silver-rimmed spectacles, whose ends were secured by a piece of black ribbon; and these he pushed up on his forehead as he turned his head side-wise and peered at the visitor.

"I'm afraid you knocked before, sir," he said in a quiet, dreamy tone.

"Yes—yes. I ought not to have come in this unceremonious way."

"Pray do not apologise," said the old gentleman, mildly. "I was busy reading, and did not hear."

He pushed his glasses a little higher and smiled in a pleasant, benevolent fashion, while at the first glance Chester saw that he was quite off the scent. For he gazed past the old man into the great hall whose walls were covered with book-shelves, while parcels and piles of volumes were heaped up in every available corner.

"I see that I have made a mistake," said Chester, hastily.

"Indeed?"

"I have come to the wrong house. I am very sorry. I am trying to find some people here."

"Yes? Well, houses are very much alike. Will you step in? I can perhaps help you. I think I have a Directory somewhere—somewhere, if I can lay my hand upon it, for I seldom use such a work, and I have so many books."

The old gentleman, whose appearance branded him as a dreamy, absorbed bookworm, drew back, and Chester involuntarily entered the hall, to note that with the book-cases away it would be such a place as he had visited; but while that was magnificently furnished, and pervaded by the soft glow of electric light, here all was dust and mouldering knowledge, the entrance suggesting that the rest of the house must be the same.

"Pray come in," said the old man, after closing the door; and he led the way into what had been intended for a large dining-room, but had been turned by its occupant into a library, packed with books from floor to ceiling; piles were upon the tables and chairs, and heaps here and there upon the dusty old Turkey carpet.

"Directory—Directory," said the old man, looking slowly round. "Books, books, books, but not the one we want."

"You seem to have a large and valuable library," Chester ventured to observe.

"Eh? Yes, I suppose so. The work of a long life, sir. But very dusty all over the house. What did you say was the name of the people you wanted?"

"I—that is," stammered Chester, confusedly, "I do not know their name. Some patients whom I want to find out."

"Are you a doctor, sir?" said the old man, looking at his visitor with a benevolent smile. "Grand profession. I should have liked to have been a doctor. But is not that a very vague description? Names are so useful for distinguishing one person, place, or thing, from another. But it was in this street, you say?"

"Well—er—no, I am not sure," said Chester, hurriedly.

"Dear me! that is rather perplexing," said the old man, taking off his spectacles and beginning to wipe them upon the tail of his dressing-gown. "But," he added, as if relieved, "the Directory would be of no use if you do not know the name."

"None whatever," said Chester, who was smarting with the thought that this pleasant old gentleman must take him for a lunatic. "Pray forgive me for troubling you in this unceremonious way."

"Oh, not at all, my dear sir, not at all. I have so few visitors, though," he added, "as you see I am surrounded by old friends."

"The same style of house—the same sort of hall," thought Chester, as he went out after a few more words had been exchanged. "Could it have been in this street?"

He looked up sharply at a heavy-faced butler and a tall, smart, powdered-headed footman, who were standing at the door of the next house, doing nothing, with the air of two men whose employers were out.

Chester looked eagerly at them and passed by, but the door was nearly closed, and he could not see inside.

His sharp look was returned with interest, the two men evidently expecting him to come up the steps and address them, but he went on for a short distance in an undecided way, thinking deeply, and trying hard to see through the mental mist which shut him in. But a short time before he had felt convinced that he had found the house and been disappointed; now he felt quite as sure that the mansion where the two servants were standing must be the place. He had no special reason for coming to the conclusion, but all the same a curious feeling of attraction made him slacken his pace, angry and annoyed the while that he had not stopped and spoken to the men.

"Great heavens! What a vacillating moral coward I have grown," he said to himself. "What would have been easier?"

He said this but felt that the task was terribly hard, for it seemed such a childish thing to do—to go about asking folk if that was the house where some people lived who had fetched him to attend a man who had been shot, and kept him a prisoner for days and days before drugging him and having him shut up in a cab to be driven about in the middle of the night.

"Why, if I could explain all this to them," he said to himself at last, "they'd think I was a harmless kind of madman, troubled with memories of the Arabian Nights Entertainments, which I was trying to drag into everyday life like a Barber's hundredth brother, or a one-eyed Calendar. Come, come, old fellow," he continued, as he mentally apostrophised himself; "go back home and prescribe for yourself, and then begin to show someone that you have been suffering from a

strange mental vagary, brought about by over-excitement. She will believe it in time, and all may come right again. Ah! how like."

He started and hurried after an open carriage in which two ladies were seated. He only saw the profile of one of them very slightly, and her back as she passed, but there was a turn of the figure—a particularly graceful air, as she leaned forward to give some instruction to the coachman—which struck him as being exactly similar to attitudes he had seen Marion assume again and again when attending upon her brother.

He jumped into a cab and told the man to follow the victoria, with the result that the latter came to a standstill in front of one of the fashionable West-End drapery establishments.

Chester was close up as the lady alighted, and he sprang out excitedly to go and speak to her.

There was every opportunity, for the carriage drove on with her companion, and she crossed the pavement alone, to walk a few steps alone in front of the great plate-glass window, gazing carelessly in at the various costumes displayed.

"A woman after all," he said to himself, bitterly annoyed at what he considered her frivolity in thinking of dress at a time when her brother was in all probability suffering still.

"But it is their nature, or the result of their education," he said the next minute, as he went close up behind her, and saw her face reflected clearly in the long series of mirrors at the back.

Chapter Eleven.

Mr Roach Lowers Himself.

"Bah!" ejaculated Chester in his rage and despair, as he swung round and hurried away. "Fool, idiot! No more like her than that miserable flower-seller is. Am I suffering from the shock of the drug they gave me? Well, if I am, she must be found all the same, for I cannot go on like this and live!"

He hurried along, without heeding which way he went, and as if by instinct made for his own house, reached it, started as if in surprise, and then turned to enter, but altered his mind after a pause, and drew the door to, after which he walked swiftly away in the direction of Westminster.

For the meeting had raised thoughts which he felt that he would only obliterate by plunging once more into the mazes of his wild search.

He was not long in reaching the old street which had so taken up his attention before, and he looked long and attentively at the mansion adjoining that occupied by the collector. The contrast was curious, the one with bright, well-curtained windows, the door glistening in its fresh graining and varnish, the other dim, unpainted, looking as if it were quite unoccupied, the very steps as if they had not been cleaned for years.

Chester went and studied a Directory, and with the name Clareborough upon his lips, he determined, after passing through the street two or three times, to risk making a call.

"Why should I mind?" he muttered. "If I am wrong, I have only made a mistake."

He walked on till he reached the house, perfectly unconscious that the footman was standing a little back from one of the narrow windows, and after having his attention drawn to the vacillating, rather haggard personage who had been taking so much interest in the house, was ready to look upon him with suspicion.

"Begging letter dodges, or something to sell," said the footman to himself, as the visitors' bell was rung, and after waiting a sufficient time to suggest that he had come from downstairs, the fellow opened the door, to receive Chester with a calm stare.

"Mr Clareborough in?"

"Not at home, sir."

"Mr Robert is, of course?"

"Out of town, sir."

"Well, I must see somebody," said Chester, who had been checked for the moment by the announcement that Mr Robert was out of town, but encouraged by the fact that two shots went home. "Ask Mr Paddy if he will see me."

The nickname made the footman raise his eyebrows, but he replied coolly—

"Not at home, sir."

"Well, then, one of the ladies."

"On the Continent, sir."

"Tut, tut, how tiresome!" cried Chester, impatiently. "Look here, my man; how is Mr Robert?"

"Quite well, thank you, sir," said the man, superciliously.

Chester stared at the man. He had evidently been schooled what to say, and for the moment the visitor hesitated, but recovering his *sang-froid* the next moment, he said—

"Rather strange that, after so serious an accident."

At that moment the butler came forward from the back of the hall, pulling the door a little more open, and Chester drew a deep breath full of satisfaction, as he caught sight of one of the statues and a chair, on the back of which was emblazoned the same crest as he had seen upon the seal.

"What is it, Orthur," said the butler in a deep, mellow voice suggestive of port wine.

"Gentleman asking to see Mr Robert, sir."

"Yes, I particularly wish to see him," said Chester. "I am the medical man who attended him after his accident."

"I beg pardon, sir."

"I say I am the medical man who attended him after his late accident, and I wish to see my patient again."

The butler glared at the speaker in a heavy, solemn way, and then turned slowly to his subordinate, who raised his eyebrows and drew down the corners of his lips.

"I beg pardon, sir," said the butler, turning his eyes again on the visitor, who was beginning to lose temper. "There is a Mr Robert here—Mr Robert Clareborough. You must mean some other gentleman. Our Mr Robert is quite well, and on the Continent just now."

"Impossible!" cried Chester, angrily. "Look here, my man, take this for yourself and my card in to Mr Robert. Say I beg that he will give me a few minutes' conversation."

The butler glanced at the card and the coin held out, but took neither.

"Beg pardon, sir. I told you that Mr Robert is on the Continent."

"Yes; and I tell you that you are not speaking the truth. Do as I tell you. I will wait till he sees me."

Chester took a couple of steps forward as he spoke, with the intention of entering the hall, but the butler stood firm, and the footman closed up to his side, the pair effectually barring the way. Chester stopped, feeling that he could do no more, for the servants must have been instructed to deny everybody to him. He thought, too, of his position; he had attended his patient and retained the heavy fee paid him, having, had he so wished, been debarred from returning it by his ignorance of the sender's address.

While he was musing the butler said haughtily—

"If you like to leave your card, sir, I'll lay it on the 'all table, and if one of the gentlemen wishes to see you, I daresay he'll write or call."

"No," said Chester, irritably. "Tell Mr Robert that I came, and—no, say nothing; I daresay I can find Mr Robert Clareborough at his club, or I shall meet him somewhere else."

He turned upon his heel, and walked sharply away, satisfied now that he had found the house, and feeling more eager than ever to obtain an interview with his patient, who would, he felt sure, have his sister by his side.

The thought of her position sent the hot blood coursing to the doctor's head, and a chill of horror and anxiety ran through him once more. But he felt that he must wait a little longer and devise some way of obtaining speech with Marion, life being unendurable till he had seen her once again.

"New dodge, Mr Roach, sir?" said the footman, when Chester had disappeared.

"I don't quite know what to make of it, Orthur," replied the butler, solemnly. "It does seem like a new way of raising the wind. It ain't books nor engravings."

"What about being Mr Robert's medical man, though. What do you make of that?"

"Well, Orthur, putting that and that together—his quick, jerky, excited way, and his fierce-looking eyes, and his ignorance of Society etiquette as to strangers calling, and wanting to see everybody, just as if he was one of the oldest friends of the family—I should say that he's one of those chaps who get a few names o' people out o' Directories, and then goes and calls."

"For swindling and picking up anything as is not out of his reach, sir, or about money?"

"Well, say a bit touched in the head, Orthur." The butler put his hand to his throat to try whether the tie of his white cravat was in its place, and looked up the street and down, acts imitated exactly by his lieutenant, and for some minutes nothing more was said. Then the footman in very respectful tones—

"Ever try your 'and, Mr Roach, sir, at any of those gambling shops abroad?"

"Well, once or twice, Orthur," said the butler, relaxing a little to his junior. "I was with a young nobleman out at Homburg and Baden and one or two other places."

"And how did you get on, sir?"

"Oh, I made a few louis, Orthur, and I should have made more if we had stopped, I daresay."

"Lor! How I should like to have a bit of a try there, sir," said the footman, eagerly.

"You would, Orthur, eh? You mean it?"

"Mean it, sir? I should just think I should. That's what Mr Robert's after now, I'll bet; and look at the money, Mr Dennis—Mr Paddy—pockets over his flutters there, let alone over every race and event coming off. Ah, it's fine to be them."

"Well, yes, Orthur, my good lad, I suppose they do pretty well. You see, if I or you were disposed to put a sov'rin or two on the next event—"

"Half-a-crown's 'bout my figure, sir."

"Ah, well, say half-a-crown, Orthur; it may turn up a pound, or two pound, or three pound. It might even be a fiver. But with them when they win, it's hundreds or thousands."

"Ah!" ejaculated the footman, smacking his lips.

"By the way, there's Newmarket coming again next week."

"Yes, sir; got anything on?"

"Well, no, not yet, Orthur; perhaps I may."

"Do, sir, and I will, too. Mr Roach, sir," whispered the young man behind his hand, as the butler turned upon him with a look of reproof for his assumption, "Black Pepper, sir."

"What, my good boy! Why, that horse is at fifty to one."

"That's it, sir; and I'm going half-a-crown on him."

"Better keep it in your pocket, my lad," said the butler, blandly.

"No, sir; I think not. I've got the tip."

"Eh?" said the butler, eagerly. "Where from?"

"I heered Mr Paddy tell Mr James, sir, that it was a sure thing, and Mr James gave him gold out of his cash-box in the lib'ry—little rolls out of that big tin box of his. I didn't hear no more, but that was quite enough for me."

"Eh? Yes," said the butler, dropping his superior way of speaking to whisper confidentially, "it will do for me too, Orthur. I'll give you half-a-sovereign to put on at the same time. Let me see, Orthur, we're not very busy this afternoon, and I shall be about to answer the door. Come down to the pantry, and I'll give you the money, and you can go and make the bets before they get to a different price."

"All right, sir, I will," said the footman excitedly. "Beg pardon, sir," he continued, as the door closed and they stood together in the elaborately-furnished hall. "Yes, Orthur, what is it?"

"Could you oblige me with half-a-crown, sir, till I get my wages?"

"Humph! Well, my lad, I do make it a rule never to lend money, but seeing that it is you, Orthur, a lad that I can trust—"

"Oh, yes, sir, you may trust me."

"I will let you have the money."

"Thank ye, sir, and I'll go at once."

Chapter Twelve.

A Fatal Attraction.

"You, Isabel dear!" cried Laura one day, as the visitor whom she had looked upon as a sister was shown into the room.

"Yes, dear, I felt obliged to come. Don't, pray don't be ashamed of me and think me weak," pleaded the poor girl, as they embraced and then sat down together upon the couch.

"How can you say such things!" cried Laura, warmly, as she passed her arm about her friend's waist.

"Because I feel that I deserve it, dear. I know how weak and foolish I am. I have been watching for an hour till I saw him go out."

"You have been watching, Bel?"

"Yes, dear; from a brougham with the blinds partly drawn down. We are in town now. Papa says I must have a change, and we are staying here for a few days before they take me over to Paris. Laura dear, I was obliged to come. Don't betray me, please, to anyone. They would be so angry if they knew, and say that I was shameless. I suppose I am, dear, but I hope you can sympathise with me a little."

"Not a little, Bel dear," cried Laura, warmly, and Isabel flung her arms about her friend's neck, buried her face in her

breast and sobbed violently for a few minutes before she raised her thin white face and said quite calmly, with a piteous smile on her lip—

“There, I told you how weak I was. I feel so much better now. I would have given anything for days and days to cry like that, but I could not. My head has been hot, and my brain seemed dry and burnt up. Now I can talk. But tell me, is—he likely to come back?”

“No,” said Laura, shaking her head. “He will not be back till night, and even if he did return he would not come here, but go straight to his room and shut himself in.”

“Has—has he told you anything?”

“No, dear; he hardly ever speaks either to me or aunt. He did say that he was kept away to attend an important patient.”

“Yes, yes, of course. That must be it.”

Laura was silent. Aunt Grace had sown a seed in her heart which had begun to grow rapidly, in spite of her sisterly efforts to check it as a noxious weed.

“Well, why don’t you speak?” cried the visitor, sharply.

“Because I have nothing to say.”

Isabel flushed up, and Laura stared at her, wondering whether this was the placid, gentle girl whom she had known so long.

“Then why have you nothing to say?” cried Isabel, angrily. “He is your brother, and if all the world is turning against him, is it not your duty to defend—to try and find excuses for his conduct?”

“Isabel!”

“Well, I mean what I say. It is quite enough that I turn against him and that everything between us is at an end. I hate him now, for he has used me cruelly, and it seems to have changed my nature; but I cannot forget the past, and would not be malignant and cruel too.”

Laura took the hand that was resigned to her, and the pair sat in silence for some minutes.

Isabel’s lips moved several times, as if she were about to speak, but no words came, till, with a desperate effort, she said in a husky whisper—

“Have you seen her, Laura?”

“I? No!” cried the girl, who was startled by the question.

“But you know she is beautiful, and rich, and aristocratic?”

“I only know what aunt has said, dear; but if she were the most beautiful woman that ever breathed, it is no excuse for Fred treating you as he did.”

“I don’t know,” said Isabel, sadly. “He is wise and clever, while I have often felt that it was more than I could expect for a man like him to care for me, so simple and homely as I am.”

“Fred ought to have been only too proud to have won such a girl,” cried Laura, sharply, but her visitor shook her head.

“It was only a brief fancy of his, dear, and as soon as the right woman came across his path he forgot me. Well, I am patient if I am not proud, for I cannot resent it, dear, only try to bear it, for I loved him very dearly; but it is very hard for the little romance of one’s poor homely life to be so soon brought to an end.”

“It was cruel—cruel in the extreme,” cried Laura, angrily. “I would not have believed that my brother, whom I almost worshipped, could have behaved so ill.”

“These things are a mystery,” said Isabel, gently; “and perhaps it is better that it should have happened now than later on when we were married. But tell me about him, dear. Has he settled down to seeing his patients again? You wrote to me saying that he was neglecting everything.”

“So he is, nearly everything, now. Bel dear, I will not be so hard upon him any more. You must be right, that he cannot help himself, or he would never have behaved so ill. He must be mad.”

Isabel clung to her with a startled look in her eyes.

“It is the only way in which I can account for the change,” continued Laura, “for I will not believe what Aunt Grace says, that all men are bad at heart. If they are, women must be as wicked too.”

Isabel shivered slightly.

“Tell me about what he does now.”

“I can’t, dear,” cried Laura, piteously. “I seem to know so little. Only that he goes out soon after breakfast, and does not come back till dinner-time, and so wet sometimes that he must have been walking about the streets for hours.”

Isabel sighed.

"I've tried—oh, how I've tried!—to win his confidence; but he says nothing, only turns away, and goes out. It is just as if he had lost something of which he is always in search, and every day he grows more moody and strange."

"Then he is ill—mentally ill," cried Isabel, excitedly. "I knew that there must be some excuse for his strange behaviour. Laura dear, my heart has misgiven me from the first. It is all so directly opposed to his nature and character. I will not believe that he could be so false to everything that he has said to me."

Laura was silent again, and Isabel's careworn face flushed once more.

"You are not sisterly and true," she cried. "The world is censorious enough without those who are nearest and dearest to us turning away and becoming our enemies."

"I am not Fred's enemy, Bel," said Laura, gently.

"Then why are you so hard against him?"

"Because I feel that by his conduct he has put us all to shame."

"Yes, all to shame—all to shame, my dear," cried Aunt Grace, who had entered the room unnoticed. "It's a wicked, wicked world; but it's very good of you to come and see us, my dear, heart-broken as we are. You have come to stop a few days, of course?"

"I? Oh, no no, no. We are staying in town," said Isabel, hurriedly, "and I must go directly."

"I am sorry to hear that," said Aunt Grace in rather an offended tone. "I did not think you would turn away from us in our trouble, Isabel; I thought better of you."

"I turn away from you and Laura, Aunt Grace? Oh no, no, no."

"I'm glad to hear it, my dear, because if you would stay we should be very glad."

"Oh, auntie!" whispered Laura, "impossible."

"It is not impossible, Laura," cried the old lady; "and I beg that you will not interfere. Isabel, my child, I shall be very glad indeed if you will stay, and you need not be at all afraid of meeting that dissolute, dissipated young man."

"Mrs Crane"—began Isabel, agitatedly, but she was interrupted at once.

"No, no, no, my dear; pray don't apologise and make excuses. Laura and I would be very pleased, and we see nothing whatever of Frederick now from breakfast-time to dinner. I don't know where he spends his days, but he is after no good."

"Aunt dear, I really must interfere once more," cried Laura, warmly. "It is, as I said, impossible for Isabel to stoop to meet Fred again; and as to staying in the house—my dear aunt, of what can you be thinking?"

"That we are beginning to live in evil times, Laura," cried the old lady, indignantly, "when little girls so far forget the respect due to their elders as to speak as you did just now. I ought to be the best judge, miss, of what is correct, if you please."

"Pray say no more, Mrs Crane," cried Isabel, earnestly. "I must go back to the hotel where we are staying. It would indeed be impossible for me to visit here now."

"Oh, very well, my dear, very well," cried the old lady, drawing herself up. "I can see very plainly that you have allowed yourself to be impressed by what Laura has said. Young people will hold together, and think that they are wiser than their elders. There is one comfort, though, for us old folk: you all find out your mistake."

"Good-bye, dear Mrs Crane," said Isabel, advancing with open hands.

"Good-day, Miss Lee," said the old lady, frigidly, as she held out her fingers limply.

But Isabel did not take them. She laid her hands upon her shoulders, and, with tears in her eyes, kissed her affectionately twice.

There was magic in the touch, for in an instant she was snatched to the old lady's breast and kissed passionately again and again.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" was sobbed; "I didn't think I was such an ill-tempered, wicked old woman. Pray, pray forgive me. I don't know what comes to me sometimes. And you in such sorrow and pain! Oh, that wicked, miserable, faithless boy! Something will come upon him some day like a judgment."

"Oh no, no, no!" cried Isabel, wildly. "Don't—pray don't say that."

"But I have said it, my dear. Ah, well, I won't think it, then, any more, for I don't see what greater judgment could fall upon him than losing you."

Isabel could not trust herself to speak, but hurried out of the room and downstairs with Laura.

"Don't speak to me, dear; let me go now," whispered the poor girl, faintly. "I am weak and ill, and can bear no more now. I ought not to have come, but the impulse was too strong. Good-bye, dear sister, good-bye!"

The two girls were locked in a loving embrace, and then, with Isabel turning sick with dread, they sprang apart, for there was the rattle of a latch-key at the door, it was thrown open, and Chester strode in.

He stood for a few moments aghast, as he saw Isabel recoil from him. Then, drawing down her veil, she tottered out, and was half-way to the brougham, drawn up by the kerb, before he recollected himself and sprang after her to open the door and try to hand her in. But she shrank from him as if in dread, and gathering her veil closely over her white, drawn face, she sank back in the carriage, and her betrothed stood gazing after her as she was rapidly driven away.

Chapter Thirteen.

Workers at a Train.

"Of course, Orthur, the different grades in this service have to be kept distinct, and the inferiors have to look up to their superiors just as it is in the army."

"Oh yes, sir, of course," said the gentleman addressed, squeezing his left eyelids together slightly, unseen by the pompous individual addressing him; "but you can't say as I haven't always been respectful and kept my place."

"Always, Orthur, always, and that's why I come down a little to you and meet you on equal terms when we are alone, for I have always found you a very respectable, intelligent young man. What's that chap staring at?"

"Us, seemingly, Mr Roach, sir," said the younger man, with a grin. "Book canvasser, that's what he is; been taking orders of the old chap next door, but didn't like the look of us, and didn't try it on. I had a peep through the open door there one day, and it was packed full o' books like a warehouse, sir."

"Yes, yes, but never mind that," said the butler, impatiently. "But as I was saying, I've always found you a very respectable young man, Orthur, and I'm disposed to trust you. Service is all very well, Orthur, but there's no saving money; and when one sees these bookmakers—coarse, beefy-faced butcher or publican sort of fellows—keeping their broughams and driving their phe-aytons, it is tempting."

"Tempting, Mr Roach," said the young footman in a quick whisper; "it gives me the agonies. Look at the gov'nors. Why, I met a young chap as I used to know when he was a page in buttons—he's a six-footer now. Well, he says he knowed our people ten years ago when they were regular hard up. His people used to visit 'em. And now look at 'em. They're on with some of the knowing ones, and putting money on all the good things. Always winning, they must be. Why, if you and me, Mr Roach, was to put the pot on as they do we should be rich men in five years."

"Don't talk so loud, Orthur; some of the women may be up at the windows."

"All right, sir. But don't you see?"

"Yes, I see; it's right enough, Orthur, when you win; but I look at the risks."

"Warn't much risk over that last flutter, sir. Put down five shillings a-piece and took up each of us a tenner."

"Yes, Orthur, that was very nice; but it mightn't always happen so."

"Why not, sir? They always win, and all we have to do is to back the same as they do—take their tips, and it's as safe as safe."

"H'm! Well, they do always seem to win, Orthur," said the butler, slowly, and he indulged in a pinch of snuff as he stood on the step.

"Seem, sir? They do. I believe if it warn't for the odds they'd be as poor as church mice."

"But how are we to get the tips, my son?"

"Keep our ears open when we're waiting table, sir, or another way."

"The same as you got that last one?"

"That's it, sir. Don't do them any harm, and if a gent leaves his betting-book in the breast-pocket of the coat as has to go down to be brushed, I don't see anything in it. 'Tain't robbery."

"H'm!" coughed the butler, glancing behind him; "no, it isn't robbery, Orthur."

"Lor! Mr Roach, sir; it's as easy as easy," whispered the footman, eagerly. "I can't think what we've been about—I beg pardon, sir—what I've been about all these months not to have put a little money on here and there. Want o' capital mostly, sir, but with all doo respect to my superiors, sir, if you and me was to make a sort o' Co. of it, and I was to tell you all I heard and found out by accident like, and you was to do the same with me, then we could talk it over together in the pantry, and settle how much we'd put on the race."

The butler frowned, shook his head, and looked dissatisfied.

"I know it's asking a deal of you, Mr Roach, sir, but it would only be like business and I should never presume, you know."

"I must think about it, Orthur; I must think about it," said the butler, importantly.

"Do, sir; and I wouldn't lose no time about it. You see, we can't do much when we're down at The Towers, and the Randan Stakes is on next week."

"H'm, yes," said the butler, relaxing a little, and condescending to a smile. "Orthur, I've got a sovereign on the favourite."

"You have, sir? What! on Ajax?"

"That's right, my lad; and I advise you to put half-a-crown or five shillings on 'im too. There's a tip for you."

"Yah!" ejaculated the footman in disgust. "I wouldn't put the price of a glass of ale on that 'orse."

"Eh, why?" cried the butler, looking startled.

"'Cause Ajax won't run."

"What? How do you know?"

"I heard the gov'nor tell the little 'un so last night, and that he was to back Ducrow."

"Phew!" whistled the butler.

"Put two guids on Ducrow, sir, and it'll be all right. I've got ten shillings on, and I'd have made it two tens if I'd had a friend who'd ha' lent me the coin."

"Orthur," whispered the butler, effusively; "you're a good lad, and I'll lend you the money."

"You will, sir? And go on as I said?"

The butler nodded.

"Carriage, sir," said the footman, sharply, and they both drew back into the hall ready for the brougham which was driven up, and from which two ladies descended.

Chapter Fourteen.

Face to Face Again.

"That's the house," said Chester to himself; "I can swear to it. Highcombe Street, Number 44."

He laughed in his excitement—an unpleasant, harsh laugh which startled him; for as a doctor he had had to deal with strange patients beside the one at the mysterious house, and he knew pretty well how a man acted who had been overwrought and whose nerves were in that state which borders upon insanity.

"This will not do," he muttered. "I must be careful," and, trying to pull himself together and make his plans in a matter-of-fact way, his startled feeling grew into a sensation of alarm, and he awakened fully now to the fact that the strain from which he had suffered had been too great.

"I must pull up short," he said to himself. "This last month I have been acting like a madman. Well, love—the real passion—is a kind of madness, and I could not have acted otherwise with the horror of the position in which I left her upon my mind."

As he walked home, though, he grew cooler, and made up his mind to watch the house until he obtained an interview with Marion.

He shrugged his shoulders as he entered his own door, and shut himself in his consulting-room, to sit for an hour trying to grow calmer; but there was a wild throbbing in his excited brain which he could not master, and try how he would, even to the extent of taking a sedative, he could not keep down the feeling of mad exultation at having at last discovered the place.

"I shall see her again," he muttered; "I shall see her again!"

A pair of soft dark eyes in a sweet, pale face seemed to rise reproachfully before him, but he mentally turned from the piteous look.

"I cannot help it. Fate—fate," he muttered; and at last, after mastering the intense desire to rush off and try and bribe the servants into speaking, he grew calmer, and obeyed the summons sent by the maid, joining his aunt and sister in the drawing-room, and afterwards formally taking the old lady down to the silent meal.

Poor Aunt Grace's plan was not succeeding.

"Don't speak to him, Laura," she had said. "It will show how we despise him for his disgraceful conduct, and make him the sooner come creeping to our knees in sackcloth and ashes."

But the days had glided on, and Chester had bought no sackcloth and had not told the cook to sift him any ashes. For the perfect silence with which he was treated was the one great satisfaction now of his life.

That night he found his sister watching him once, and as he met her eyes there was for the moment a feeling of uneasiness akin to remorse; but it passed off directly, swept away by the exciting thought that he had at last attained the goal of his desires, and must now sooner or later encounter Marion.

A week then passed, and he was still no farther, when one evening as he turned into Highcombe Street, he saw a carriage at the door; and a minute later three ladies in evening dress came and stepped in, the footman mounted to his

place, and the horses sprang off.

"The brougham I was fetched in," muttered Chester, and hailing a cab he said sharply, "Follow that carriage at a short distance till I tell you to stop."

He was not surprised at the direction taken by the carriage in front, which was kept just in sight till it turned into Bow Street, when Chester signed to his driver to stop, and sprang out, turning the corner just in time to see the carriage slowly passing in its turn through the gateway leading under the portico of the opera.

He followed to find that the occupants had alighted, and upon entering the lobby he caught sight of the back of Marion's dress as she swept through one of the great baize-covered doors.

Here there was a check. The door-keeper held out his hand for the customary ticket, and Chester turned impatiently away, to go to the box-office, when for the first time it struck him that he was not in evening dress, and could not pass into the stalls.

He stood biting his lips, and hesitating as to whether he should take a cab back home, to dress, and return, but he felt that he could not do that. A dozen things might happen to prevent his catching sight of Marion again; and snatching at the first idea that came, he took a ticket for the upper part of the house, hired an opera-glass and then climbed nearly to the top.

Here upon taking a seat he came out again in despair. Even with the aid of the glass he found he could not get a glimpse of a third of the house, and feeling that at all costs he must get into the stalls in as central a position as possible, he descended again to the box-office, and secured a stall nearly in the centre of the third row.

Having made sure of his seat, he hurried back to Raybeck Square calculating that he could be back within an hour.

Bidding the cabman wait, he sprang up to his room, conscious of the fact that Aunt Grace was watching; and after his hurried change he knew by the ajar door of the drawing-room that she was there watching still.

But this passed almost unnoticed in the excitement, and once more he was in the cab, eager and with his imagination running riot.

"What an idiot I was not to ask the number of their box," he said to himself.

He did ask as soon as he reached the opera house, and found it was almost central on the grand tier; but after taking his place he had no opportunity for turning round till the end of the act in progress, and he sat trembling with excitement and wondering whether Marion had recognised him as he entered.

The stage, the music, the house crowded with a fashionable assembly, were non-existent to Chester, as he sat there gazing in imagination at a face—the face of the woman who from their first encounter seemed to have taken entire possession of his faculties, enchaining his spirit so that he seemed to live and breathe for her alone.

"Will this wretched singing never end?" he said to himself, as one of the great Italian singers filled the vast place with the clear, vibrating tones of her voice. "The fools! The idiots!" he muttered angrily as the plaudits rang out at the end of the scene; and then he sat waiting till at last the drop scene descended and, lorgnette in hand, he rose and, to avoid the air of being too sudden, he slowly swept the grand tier of boxes, beginning on his right near the stage, feeling that Marion must be watching him, and profoundly unconscious of the fact that scores to right and left were doing the same.

When the field of his glass drew nearer to the box upon which he sought to focus it, he grew slower in his movements, as if desirous of delaying the supreme delight for a few moments longer, but at last he stopped short, gazing with every fibre thrilling at the beautiful, imperious face which held him as if fascinated.

The faces of her companions were to right and left, each occupying a corner of the box, while Marion was seated a little back, looking dull and preoccupied, while she slowly waved a large black fan, which threw her face into partial shadow from time to time.

For the first minute, as he drank in the various beauties of the countenance which seemed to be so near, Chester felt that she must be seeing him, but directly after he knew that she was looking dull and listless, and as if she felt the scene before her wearisome in the extreme.

There could be no mistake. It was she. There was not such another face in the wide world; and yet he hesitated to go round to the box, asking himself whether he could—whether he had any right to force himself upon the notice of those who had plainly enough their reasons for wishing to cut all connection with him as soon as his patient was out of danger.

"They may wish to, but she cannot. It is impossible. She must be ready to place her hand in mine. Perhaps even now that dull, weary look may be connected with our sudden parting. Who knows? Yes, come what may, I will go."

Chester passed slowly along the row and out into the entry, went up the broad stairs, and with his heart increasing its pulsations rapidly, he stopped at last at the door of a box, drew a deep breath, and then tapped lightly.

There was no reply and he tapped again.

This time there was a movement within, the catch was drawn back, the door thrown open, and a deep voice exclaimed—

"How late you are! Hallo!"

Chester had been in the act of stepping in, but paused on the threshold, completely taken aback at finding a gentleman in the box, while the speaker, who had not risen, but leaned back, balancing himself on two legs of his chair, fell over side-wise in his astonishment, but saved himself by catching at the partition.

He sprang up the next moment, as Chester recovered himself and advanced, but neither of the three ladies, who had

turned, made the slightest movement towards acknowledging him, and left it to their companion to speak.

"May I ask whom you wish to see, sir?"

"Certainly," replied Chester, quietly, "Mrs James, Mrs Dennis, Miss Clareborough—"

No one moved. He might have been addressing so many statues, as he went on—

"And Mr Dennis Clareborough."

"You seem to have our names right, sir," said the stalwart young fellow, shortly, "but I have not the pleasure of knowing you."

"Indeed!" said Chester. "Is your memory so short, sir? May I ask after your cousin's wound?"

"Certainly, if you like, sir," replied the young man, with a little laugh, "but I'm afraid I can't tell you."

Chester felt nettled and turned to the lady in the centre, who sat looking over the back of her chair.

"Perhaps Miss Marion Clareborough will tell me how her brother is progressing?"

"Dennis," said one of the ladies, before any reply could be made, "is this a friend of yours? If so, introduce us."

"Friend of mine? Hang it, no! Gentleman has got into the wrong box. Never saw him before in my life. What number did you want, sir?"

"This," said Chester, sternly, as he looked the young man fiercely in the eyes. "Perhaps Miss Clareborough will speak. Believe me, I took great interest in your brother's case. Can I see him again?"

The lady he addressed turned to one of her companions and whispered a few words, whereupon Mrs James said coldly—

"Will you help this gentleman to find the box he is in search of, Dennis? The place is so dark now the curtain is down, and he does not see the mistake he has made."

"No, that's it," said the young man. "Ah, here you are, then, at last," he cried, as the entrance was darkened by another figure. "Come in. This gentleman wants to find some friends of his, and he has come to this box by mistake."

"Indeed!" and Chester at that one word felt the blood surge up to his temples, and a fierce sensation of passion began to make his nerves tingle.

"Well," continued the speaker, "it's very easy, dear boy. Places are so confoundedly dark. Couldn't get here sooner, girls; man detained me at the club—I beg pardon, sir; the box-keeper could no doubt help you."

The cool, contemptuous manner of the man took away Chester's breath, and he felt himself almost compelled to give place.

"Thanks, much," said the newcomer, drawing slightly aside for Chester to back out. "Don't apologise. They ought to light up the house more when the curtain is down."

The next moment the door was thrust to, the catch snapped, and as Chester stood there, undecided what to do, he could hear the voices within carrying on a conversation which sounded so calm and matter-of-fact that in his excited state the listener asked himself whether he was in his right senses, and at last hurried away, to pause in the refreshment-room and drink off a glass of brandy to steady his nerves.

He did not return to his seat in the stalls, but stopped in the entry, where, invisible in the gloom, partially hidden by one of the curtains, he stood using his glass upon the occupants of the box he had so lately quitted.

As he stood there, feeling half stunned, he went over the words that had passed and the action of the inmates, forgetting that all was quite consistent with the conduct he might have expected from people whose whole behaviour had been mysterious and strange.

At last he saw a movement among those he was watching, and, desperate almost with rage and despair, he hurried round to station himself in the lobby, where he felt certain that the party must pass. But they were so long in coming that he was about to seek another doorway.

Then he saw that he was right, for the big, bluff-looking brother and cousin came by without seeing him, spoke to the footman Chester had seen at the house, and then returned, as if to join their party.

A few minutes later they came out slowly amongst the crowd, the tide turning them quite to the outside, so that they were close to him who watched them intently, as if in doubt of his own sanity, wondering whether he could have made any mistake.

"No," he whispered to himself, as he fixed his eyes on the beautiful woman, upon whose arm he could have laid his hand, so close was she to him as she passed.

It was as if his steady gaze influenced her, for when she was just abreast she turned her head quickly, and her eyes met his full as she rested her hand upon the stalwart young fellow's arm.

Chester's look seemed to fascinate her, for her eyes were fixed and strange in those brief moments. Then she passed on, gazing straight before her. There was no start, no sign of the slightest emotion. It was simply the inquiring look of one who seemed to fancy he was the personage who had made his appearance in their box, otherwise one whom she had

never before seen.

The impulse was strong upon Chester to follow, but for quite a minute he stood feeling as if he had been stunned.

Then, with a strange, harsh utterance, he forced himself roughly through the well-dressed crowd in his endeavours to follow the party, but weeks of anxiety and abnormal excitement were taking their toll at last; a sudden giddiness attacked him, and with a heavy groan he reeled and fell in the midst of the pleasure-seeking throng.

Chapter Fifteen.

Aunt Grace's Cure.

Chester was borne into the box-office, and a medical man sent for, under whose ministrations he recovered consciousness, and soon after was able to declare who he was and his ability to return home unaided.

In the short conversation, the doctor, upon learning that his patient was a fellow-practitioner, took upon himself to utter a few words of warning.

"Mustn't trifle with this sort of thing, my friend," he said. "You know that as well as I can tell you, eh?"

"Yes, yes," said Chester, irritably; "I'll take more care. I have been over-doing it lately, but," he added, with a curious laugh, "you see I was taking a little relaxation to-night."

"Humph! Yes, I see," said the doctor, watching him curiously. "Well, you feel that you can go home alone?"

"Oh yes; see me into a cab, please. Thanks for all you have done. Only a touch of vertigo."

"Only a touch of vertigo," said the strange doctor, as he saw the hansom driven off. "'Only a touch of vertigo' means sometimes the first step towards a lunatic asylum."

"Ah!" muttered Chester, while being driven homewards, "people look at me as if I were going wrong in my head. I wonder whether I am."

He laughed as he let himself in and heard a rustle on the stairs. "Watching again," he said to himself. "And they think I'm going wrong, I suppose. But how strange! That utter denial of all knowledge of me. Even she!"

He went into his room, and sat thinking of the incidents of the day and evening for some hours before throwing himself upon his bed, but was down at the usual time in the morning, partook of the unsocial breakfast and rose almost without saying a word.

"Yes, what is it?" said Chester, sharply, for Laura hurried to his side and laid her hand upon his arm. "Money for housekeeping?"

"No—no!" cried his sister, angrily, and there she paused.

"Well, speak, then; don't stop me. I am busy this morning."

"I must stop you, Fred," cried Laura, passionately. "We cannot go on like this."

"Why?" he said calmly. "Because we are brother and sister. We have always been as one together. You have had no secrets from me. I have had none from you. I have always been so proud of my brother's love for me, but now all at once everything comes to an end. You withhold your confidence."

"No; my confidence, perhaps, for the time being," he said gravely; "not my love from you. God forbid."

"But you do, Fred."

"No; it is more the other way on," he replied. "You have withheld your love from me, and checked any disposition I might have felt to confide in you."

"Fred!"

"Don't deny it," he said quietly. "Since I was called away so strangely, and kept away against my will—"

"Against your will!" cried Laura, scornfully.

"Hah!" he cried, "it is of no use to argue with you, my child. Poor old aunt has so thoroughly imbued you with her doctrines of suspicion that everything I say will be in vain."

"Imbued me with her suspicions!" cried Laura, angrily. "That is it; because I am quite a girl still you treat me as if I were a child. Do you—oh, I cannot say it!—yes, I will; I am your sister, and it is my duty to try and save you from something which will cause you regret to the end of your days. Do you dare to deny that you have got into some wretched entanglement—something which has suddenly turned you half mad?"

"No," he said quietly. "That is so."

"Then how can you go on like this? You have broken poor Isabel's heart, estranged everybody's love from you, and are running headlong to ruin. Fred—brother, for all our sakes, stop before it is too late."

He looked at her mournfully, took her hand and kissed it, and with a passionate burst of sobbing she flung her arms

about his neck and clung there.

"Then you do repent, Fred? You will go there no more. Listen, dear; I forgive you everything now, because you are going to be my true, brave, noble brother again, and after a time—some day—Isabel will forgive you too; for she does love you still, Fred, in spite of all. There—there," she cried, kissing him again and again, "it is all over now."

Chester loosened her hands from his neck and shook his head sadly.

"No, Laury," he said, "it is not all over now."

"What!" she cried quickly. "You will not—you cannot go back now."

"Yes," he said, "even if you do not forgive me, I must."

"Fred!"

"Look here, little one," he said wearily; "you have grown to think and act like a woman, and you complain that I do not confide in you. Well, I will be frank with you to some extent. Laura dear, I am not my own master. I cannot do as you wish."

"Fred, you must."

"Say that to some poor creature who is smitten with a terrible mental complaint; tell him he must be ill no longer, but cast off the ailment. What will he reply?"

He paused for an answer, but his sister stood gazing at him without a word.

"He will tell you that he would do so gladly, but that it is impossible."

"But this is not impossible, Fred," cried Laura; "and you are again treating me like a child. Yes, I have begun to think like a woman, and though it may sound shameless I will speak out. Do you think that we do not know that all this is wicked dissipation?"

He laughed bitterly, as he pressed his hand to his weary head.

"You do not know—you do not know."

"Yes," cried Laura, embracing him again; "I know that my poor brother has yielded to some temptation, but I know, too, that it only needs a strong, brave, manly effort to throw it all off; and then we might be happy once more."

He took her face between his hands and looked down at her lovingly for a few minutes, then kissed her brow tenderly.

"No," he said; "you do not understand, my child. I am not master of my actions now."

He hurried from the room. Then she heard the door close, and his footsteps hurrying up the stairs followed by the banging of his door.

"Lost, lost!" she wailed; and she threw herself sobbing upon the couch.

"Well!" said a sharp voice, and the girl started up and tried hard to remove all traces of her tears.

"I did not hear you come in, aunt dear."

"Perhaps not, my love, but I have been waiting and listening. Well, what does he say about coming home in that state last night? I'm sure, my dear, that was wine! Is he going to be a good boy now?"

Laura uttered a passionate sob.

"Oh no, aunt, oh no!" she cried.

"Because if he is and will repent very seriously, I may some day, perhaps, forgive him. But I must have full assurance that he is really sorry for all his wickedness. What did he say, child?"

"Nothing, aunt. It is hopeless—hopeless."

"Then I was right at first. He has gone quite out of his mind, and I fully believe that it is our duty to have him put under restraint."

"Aunt!" cried Laura, wildly.

"Yes, my dear. That is the only cure for such a complaint as his. A private asylum, Laury dear."

"Oh, aunt, impossible! How can you say anything so horrible?"

"My dearest child, nothing can be horrible that is to do a person good. It is quite evident to me that he can no longer control his actions."

"No, he said so," sobbed Laura.

"Hah! I knew I was right. Well, then, my dear, we must think it over seriously. You see, the weakness must have

come on suddenly. How, he and somebody else best know," said the lady, with asperity. "You see, attacks like that are only temporary, and his would, I am sure, yield to proper treatment. Now let me see what ought to be the first steps? This is a valuable practice, if he has not completely wrecked it by his wicked dissipation, and I think it ought to be our first duty, my dear, to get a permanent *locum tenens*—a man of some eminence, who might be induced to come if some hope were held out to him of a future partnership. Then we could consult him about what to do, for I believe certificates have to be obtained before a patient is sent to an asylum."

"Aunt! Are you going mad too?" cried Laura, angrily.

"Laura! my child!"

"Well, then, you should not say such horrid things about Fred. Consult a perfect stranger about putting him into a lunatic asylum! Oh, shame!"

"Shame to you, Laura, for daring to speak to me as you do. Do you want him to have one of those what-do-you-call-thems?—Para-para-para-dox—no, no, paroxysms; and then do as mad people always do, turn against those they love best? Do you want him to come some night and murder us both in our beds?"

"No, aunt, of course not," said Laura, growing more cool and matter-of-fact now.

"Then do not from any false sentiment begin to oppose me. A few months under proper treatment in a good private asylum, and he would come back completely strengthened and cured. Now, let me see; I think under the circumstances that we ought first of all, my dear, to take poor dear Isabel into our confidences."

"Aunt!" cried Laura; "if you dare to tell Isabel that you think such a dreadful thing of poor Fred I don't know what I will not do."

"Dare, Laura, dare?" said Aunt Grace, sternly.

"Yes, aunt, dare!" cried the girl. "If you do I'll tell poor Bel that it is one of your hallucinations, and that you have got softening of the brain."

"Laura!" shrieked the old lady, as she sank back in the nearest chair. "Oh, that I should live to hear such words! You horrible, abandoned child!"

"I'm very sorry, auntie," said Laura, coolly, "but you always impressed upon me that I should tell the truth. You must be getting imbecile, or you would never have proposed such a dreadful thing."

"Laura!"

"Yes, aunt; it is a sign, too, that you know it is coming on. You must have been thinking of madhouses, and that made you speak."

"Worse and worse!" wailed the old lady. "You must be getting as bad as your brother. Actually siding with him now!"

"No, aunt, only pitying him, for I am beginning to believe that he is suffering worse than we are."

Chapter Sixteen.

A Dangerous Case.

"It's all over," said Chester to himself. "That doctor's correct, and I must not trifle or I shall be laid by with something wrong in the head. That drugging began it, and I'm not right. I won't give up the quest, but I must get square first, and I can't do so here. I'll pack up and go on the Continent for a bit. Change may make me able to think consistently. Now my brain is in a whirl."

He tried to reason calmly, and at last, not feeling in the humour to see and explain to his sister, he wrote to her briefly, telling her that the anxiety and worry of the case to which he had been called that night had completely unhinged him, and he found that the only thing he could do to recover his tone was to get right away for a time. He was going, he said, to see a colleague that morning, who would come and take charge of the practice, and he would write again from abroad.

This done, he fastened down the envelope and left the letter upon the table, after which he went to his room, threw a few necessaries into a portmanteau, brought it down, with Aunt Grace carefully watching from the top of the staircase, and sent the servant for a cab.

Five minutes later he was on his way to his club to consult the time-tables and guide-book as to the route to take.

He was not long in deciding upon Tyrol as the starting-place for a long mountain tramp. There was a train at night, and without returning home he would dine at the club and start from there.

He followed out the earlier portion of his programme, even to dining at the club, but afterwards, upon entering the smoking-room and taking a cigar, he found the place half full, and, longing for solitude, he went out to stroll down the steps and into the Park for an hour, ending by taking one of the seats under an old elm in the Mall and sitting back thinking of all that had happened during the past few weeks.

He was once more going over the scenes by the wounded man's couch, and seeing again the every movement and look of his anxious sister, when he shrank back against the trunk of the great tree and let his chin sink upon his breast, for there were steps just to the right, and two gentlemen strolled by, one of them talking aloud angrily, and the following words smote like blows upon the listener's ears—

"Look here, if you want to quarrel, say so, Paddy. But you're no saint, so don't you begin preaching morality. I repeat I have taken a tremendous fancy to her; what then? As for Rob, curse him for a miserable prig! If it were not for the consequences I'm ready to wish that the shot had ended it, and I swear I'll—"

The last words died out into the night air, and, save for the preternaturally excited state of his brain, Chester would not have heard so much.

He sat up, and saw the figures of the brothers, who had passed him, growing indistinct as they went beyond the next lamp; and then he rose and followed.

"And I swear I'll—' what?" said Chester to himself. "Shoot me? Well, let him. There, it's all over. I can't go away; I must see this out to the very end."

Chester followed the pair with the full intention of demanding an explanation and having a scene with the elder brother, for his resentment seemed to be making the blood bubble up through his veins. They were walking through the Palace Yard, and directly after they crossed the road and went up St James's Street, talking angrily; and he was just about to join them when he saw the younger turn angrily off into the road, as if about to separate, but in an instant the elder had him by the arm and after a faint resistance led him back on to the pavement, where Chester was awaiting them.

"Mr Clareborough," he said sharply, and both brothers turned upon him in surprise.

"Yes; what is it?" cried the elder. "Oh, the man in the wrong box! Come along, boy."

He turned short off, and before Chester could recover from his surprise, the brothers had passed through the swinging doors of one of the clubhouses and disappeared in the great hall.

Chester was about to follow, but checked himself upon the threshold as the question arose in his mind, What for?

To demand an explanation of their conduct toward him.

Well, he felt that he might demand it, but he knew that they would preserve the same attitude as before, and treat him with contempt—treat him as if he were some half-witted being who claimed acquaintance; and how could he get people to believe in his strange story—how could he advance his position with respect to Marion?

He calmed down as quickly as he had grown excited and began to feel that to force a quarrel in the club to which these men belonged could have but one ending, that of the police being called in and his being ejected.

"And what then?" he asked himself. "Possibly the whole business would be dragged into the police court, then into the daily papers, and if Marion were ready to continue her intimacy with the man who had saved her brother's life, would she not be hurt and annoyed with him for forcing into publicity an affair which the conduct of all concerned showed them to be eager to keep hushed up?"

Chester walked down St James's Street again, with the intention of cooling his burning head in the quiet gloom of the Park; but he altered his mind and turned off to his left, along Pall Mall, re-entered his club and went up to the smoking-room, which proved to be a little more full than before, but this did not trouble him now. He sat down and took a cigar and began smoking, thinking, trying to argue out the reason for the strange behaviour of these Clareboroughs. He could understand that there had been a desperate quarrel, resulting in the use of the revolver, and he was ready to grant that the elder brother's conduct toward Marion had been the moving cause for that. But he felt convinced that there was something more behind; else why all the secrecy?

Here they were, a wealthy family, evidently moving in good society, and living in a magnificently-appointed mansion; but during all the days of his enforced stay, with the exception of the old housekeeper, he had not seen a single servant, and nothing to suggest that any were in the place. That they kept domestics was plain enough, for he had since seen the butler and footman. Then, too, there had been the coachman who drove the carriage that night, though he, as an outdoor servant, might easily have been kept in ignorance of all that took place in the house. But where were the others, the staff which would be necessary for carrying on such an establishment?

There was no answer to the question, even at the finishing of a second cigar, and he gave it up, and then smiled to himself as he rose.

"How absurd!" he muttered. "Everything else passed out of my head. I meant to cross to-night. Well, it is not too late, is it? Pish! Two hours. Oh, impossible! I cannot leave town. How could I go knowing that even now she may be praying for my help?"

Chester passed out again into the cool night, and involuntarily turned in the direction of the Park, crossed it, and walked slowly toward Highcombe Street, where, he hardly knew why, he began to promenade the pavement on the opposite side of the road, stopping at last just inside a doorway when a cab came sharply along; and his nerves began to thrill as he saw it pulled up at the door of the mansion.

Two gentlemen sprang out, and while one paid the driver, the other strolled up the steps, there was the rattle of the latch-key, the door was flung wide, and from where he stood Chester had a glimpse of the handsome hall, now looking sombre and strange with the lights half turned down.

Directly after the door was closed, and the chimes of the Palace clock rang out four times, followed by two deep, booming strokes on the great cracked bell.

"Two o'clock!" thought Chester, as he walked along past the house, fancying that there was a face at the open window of a room on the second floor, but he could not be sure, and as he turned back it was gone.

"Go abroad!" he said to himself. "At such a time. It would be madness."

Then giving way to a sudden impulse, he hurried back to the front of the house, went up to the door and rang the bell

sharply.

"Fool!" he muttered. "Why did I not speak to them then? I will have an explanation. I have a right, and it is evident that I have the whip-hand of them, or they would not act their parts like this."

He knew that he was wildly excited and doing a foolish thing, but his actions were beyond his control now, and he was ready for Marion's sake to take the maddest steps on her behalf, or he would not have stood at that moment where he did.

"Too late," he muttered, as there was no reply. "I've let my opportunity slip."

But all the same he dragged sharply at the bell again, and as his hand fell to his side the door was opened and he found himself face to face with the man he sought.

"Yes, what is it?" cried James Clareborough, sharply. "What! you again? Here, what the devil—Who are you? What do you want?"

"You," said Chester, firmly, "you and your brother. I will have an explanation with you both. I will see—I will not be put off like this."

"Confound him!" muttered James Clareborough between his teeth.

"Here, I say, old chap," growled his brother, who now appeared, "have you been dining somewhere and over-doing it a bit? Hadn't you better go home quietly? We don't want to whistle for a policeman and have you locked up."

"You hold your tongue!" cried James Clareborough. "I'll soon settle with this gentleman. Now then, my tipsy individual, you want a few words with me—an explanation?"

"Yes and at once," cried Chester, beside himself with rage at the very sight of the man whose conduct toward Marion absolutely maddened him.

As he spoke he pressed forward to enter, but the brothers barred the way.

"No, no," said the elder, "none of that. We're not going to have the house disturbed by your ravings. It's only a few minutes to the Park—come on there and we'll have it out, and done with it."

"No; we won't," growled the younger brother, fiercely, and, placing his hands suddenly upon Chester's breast, he gave him a heavy thrust, drove him staggering back, and almost in the one effort snatched his brother aside and banged to the door.

"What the devil do you mean by that?" cried James Clareborough, savagely, as he tried to reopen the door, but his brother placed his back to it and held him off.

"To keep you cool, old man," growled the younger. "Get him in the Park at this time, with no one near! What did you mean to do?"

"Do what I'll do now."

"Got something in your pocket, old chap?"

"Yes, I have. Let me go out."

"And have a paragraph in the papers to-morrow morning about a discovery in the Park?"

"Yes. Curse him! he's getting dangerous. If he is not silenced, what's to happen next? Let me go, boy. There, he's ringing again. Let me go."

"Not if I can stop it, old man. We've got risks enough as it is."

"Curse you, Paddy, for a fool!" cried the other; and he seized his brother and tried to drag him away, while the great fellow reached down and drew a pistol from his brother's pocket.

"Got your sting, Jem," he cried. "You don't use that to-night."

"Wrong!" cried the other, snatching it away; and as the bell was rung violently again he made for the door.

Chapter Seventeen.

Assaulting the Castle.

Chester stood on the doorstep for some minutes, thinking, in perfect ignorance of what was taking place inside, and twice over he rang the bell, in the determination to enter and confront these men.

But reason stepped in.

"No," he thought, "I could do nothing. For Marion's sake I must bring subtlety to bear, not brute force. And this is leaving England, to try and forget everything," he added, with a mocking laugh. "No; I must stay and unravel it all."

He went home, had recourse to a drug again, and slept heavily till morning, and then, with his brain throbbing painfully from his anxious thoughts, he had left the house, determined to make another effort to obtain speech of Marion.

That she was completely under the influence of her friends he felt sure, but if, he told himself, he could only obtain an interview, all might be well.

To this end and full of a fresh project, he took a four-wheeled cab and had himself driven to the end of Highcombe Street, where he bade the driver draw up and wait.

Here he threw himself back in one corner of the vehicle, opened a newspaper so as to screen his face and at the same time enable him to keep a strict watch upon the house.

Fortune favoured him. At the end of an hour he saw the carriage drawn up, and soon after the brothers and their wives came out and were driven off; then the butler stood airing himself upon the step for a time, and finally went in and closed the door.

Chester's heart beat high with hope, and he waited for a few minutes, which seemed to be an hour. Then, telling the man to wait, he was going down the street, when a shout brought him back.

"Beg pardon, sir; you didn't take my number," said the driver, with a grin.

"No, why should I?" said Chester, wonderingly.

"So as to be able to find me again if you forgets to come back, sir."

"Oh, I see," said Chester, smiling, and then placing a couple of coins in the man's hand. "Don't be afraid; I shall return."

The opportunity had come, and without hesitation Chester went straight to the door and rang.

The butler answered the bell, after keeping him waiting some minutes, for it was not visiting time; and as soon as the man saw who it was he reddened a little and looked indignant.

"Take my card up to Miss Clareborough," said Chester, quietly.

"Not at home, sir."

"Look here, my man, I particularly wish to see your young lady, so have the goodness to take up my card."

"Not at home, sir," repeated the butler, pompously.

"To ordinary visitors, perhaps," said Chester, whose temper was rising at the man's manner; "but she will see me."

"I told you twice over that our young lady wasn't at home, sir," said the butler, more offensive in speech and manner than ever.

"Yes," said Chester, still quietly, "and I know perfectly well that this is only the customary formal reply to ordinary callers. My business is important, and I tell you that Miss Clareborough will see me, so take my card up at once."

"Look here, sir," said the man, insolently; "I have had my orders, and I know what to do. Once more: not at home."

"Am I to understand that you refuse to take up my card?"

"Yes, sir; that's it. They've seen your card, and master said he didn't know you, and if you came again the family was not at home."

"I have nothing to do with your master or his brother, my good fellow. My business is with Miss Clareborough, and I insist on seeing her."

"Not at home," said the man, shortly; and he drew back to close the door.

But firmly convinced that the lady he desired to see was a prisoner, Chester in his excitement stepped forward, and, to the man's astonishment, entered the hall.

"Now," he said angrily, "no more of this insolence, sir; take or send my card in to Miss Clareborough."

"I say, look here," cried the the butler, whose face grew ruddy and then white, "haven't I told you she isn't at home?"

"Yes, more than once, my good fellow, and I tell you now that she is, and that I will not stir from here until I have seen her."

"Then look here, sir," cried the butler; "I shall send for the police."

"Do—at once," retorted Chester.

The butler's jaw dropped in his astonishment, but he recovered himself, closed the door, and took a few steps further into the hall, Chester following.

"Come, none of that," cried the man. "You'll stop there, and—"

"What's the meaning of this, Mr Roach?" said a familiar voice, and Chester eagerly pressed forward.

"Ah, the housekeeper," he cried quickly. "This man has refused again and again to bear my card to Miss Marion. Will you have the goodness to take it to her, and say that I beg she will see me for a few minutes at once?"

The old lady's white forehead puckered up beneath her grey hair, as she looked in a startled way at the speaker, and then turned to the butler, who was holding Chester's card between his first and second fingers.

"Who is this gentleman?" she said rather sternly, and for a moment Chester was so completely taken aback that the butler had time to speak.

"Here's his card, ma'am. He's been before wanting to see Miss Clareborough. Master's seen it, ma'am, and says he don't know anything about the gentleman, and that if he had business he was to write."

The housekeeper turned to Chester, raising her eyebrows a little, and he had by this time recovered his balance.

"Of course," he said, "I can quite understand Mr James's action after his treatment of me, madam."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Let me speak to you alone," he continued. "I can say nothing before this man."

"Had you not better write to Mr Clareborough, sir, if you have business with the family?"

"No, certainly not," said Chester. "My business is with Miss Clareborough, and I insist upon seeing her."

"Excuse me, sir," said the housekeeper, calmly; "as a gentleman, you must know that one of the ladies would decline to see a stranger on business unless she knew what that business was."

"A stranger—on business!" cried Chester, angrily. "My good woman, why do you talk like this to me?"

"Really, sir, I do not understand you," said the housekeeper, with dignity.

"Let me see you alone," said Chester, earnestly.

"Certainly not, sir. Have the goodness to say what is your business here."

"You know it is impossible," cried Chester. "See me alone—send this man away."

"Stay where you are, Mr Roach," said the housekeeper, who might, from her calm, dignified manner, have been the mistress of the house. "Are you not making some mistake, sir? Mr Clareborough evidently does not know you."

"Nor you either?" said Chester, sarcastically.

"I, sir? Certainly not," replied the housekeeper.

Chester stared at her angrily.

"Do you dare to tell me this?" he cried.

"Come, sir, none of that, please," said the butler, interfering. "We can't have you always coming here and asking to see people who don't want to see you."

"Stand back, you insolent scoundrel!" cried Chester, turning upon the butler fiercely; and the man obeyed on the instant.

"There is no occasion to make a scene, sir," said the housekeeper, gently. "Pray be calm. You have, I see, made a mistake. Had you not better go home and write to Mr Clareborough? If your business is important, he will, no doubt, make an appointment to meet you."

"But you!" cried Chester, returning to the attack, "you deny that you know me?"

"Certainly, sir, I do not know you," replied the housekeeper.

"Had you not better dismiss this man?"

"No, no," said the housekeeper, smiling; and there was a very sweet look on her handsome old face. "There is no occasion for that. Pray take my advice; go back home and write what you wish to say."

"After what has passed, madam, I can hold no communication with Mr Clareborough."

"Indeed! Well, sir, of course all you say is foreign to me, but I must tell you that it seems the only course open; so much can be done by letter."

"Then, as I understand," said Chester, more quietly, "you refuse to give me a few words alone?"

"Yes, sir; you can have nothing to say to me that Mr Roach, the butler, may not hear."

Chester looked at the woman fixedly, but she met his gaze in the calmest way—not a muscle moved, not a nerve quivered.

"Very well," he said at last, "I see you are determined to ignore the past entirely."

The housekeeper made a slight deprecatory movement toward him, and then signed the butler to open the door, which he did with alacrity, but Chester stood fast, looking past the housekeeper toward the end of the hall, where there was the opening into the great dining-room, the scene of the strange adventure when he first came to the house.

"Very well," he said at last, as he mastered a wild desire to rush upstairs and call Marion by name until she replied; and he spoke now in a subdued tone of voice which the butler could not hear, "of course you are in the plot, but I shall not let matters rest here. It would have been better if you had met me as a friend—as I believed you to be—of Miss Marion and Mr Robert, but I see that you are bound up with the others. And mind this: I was disposed to assist in hushing up that trouble, but as I am convinced that Miss Marion is receiving foul play, I shall leave no stone unturned to obtain speech with her, even going so far, if necessary, as to call in the aid of the police."

There was a calm, grave, pitying look upon the housekeeper's countenance which literally staggered Chester, and he went out quickly and turned to the right, the butler closing the door with a bang.

"He's a regular lunatic, ma'am," said the butler. "Got hold of the names from the Directory or the tradesfolk; but I'm very glad you were there."

"Poor gentleman," said the housekeeper, gravely, "there seems to be some strange hallucination in his brain."

Chapter Eighteen.

The Bookworm Tries to Bore.

As it happened, Chester was musing as he went down the steps.

"They treat me as if I were mad. Have I got some strange notion in my head? No woman could possibly meet one with such a—Ah! good-day!" he cried quickly, for, as he was passing the next door, the grey, dreamy-looking old occupant was in the act of inserting the latch-key.

He turned slowly, pushed back his rather broad-brimmed hat, and blinked at the speaker through his spectacles.

"I beg your pardon," he said, rather wonderingly; "I—can't see; yes, to be sure, I remember now;" and the old man's face lit up. "I remember now. My young friend who was making inquiries. Will you step in, sir? I do not have many visitors."

He threw open the door and stood smiling holding it back, giving Chester a smile of invitation which made him enter—that, in combination with the sudden thought that he might perhaps learn something about the next-door neighbours.

"Really," he said frankly, "as a perfect stranger, this is somewhat of an intrusion."

"Not at all, my dear young friend, not at all. Glad to see you. I lead such an old-world, lost kind of life. I am very glad to have a caller. Come in, my dear young friend, come in. No, no; don't set your hat down there; it will be covered with dust. Let me put it here. Now, then, come in."

He led the way into the room on their left, and took a couple of very old folios off a chair.

"A dusty place—a very dusty place; but I dare not trust servants. They have no idea of the value of books, my dear sir. I found one had torn out some pages from a very rare specimen of Wynkyn de Worde to burn under some damp firewood. Can't trust them—can't trust them. I've just had a very serious disappointment. Been down to an auction."

"Indeed?" said Chester, looking at the old man curiously and wondering where he had seen a face something like his before.

"Yes. One of the big sales. There was a priceless copy of one of Marie de Medici's books in the list, and I fancy it was with a Grolier binding—just his style; but two other people wanted it. I bid up to four hundred and then stopped. A bit of a bibliomaniac, my dear sir, but not book-mad enough to go higher; couldn't afford it, even for a unique, tall copy. Knocked down for se-ven hun-dred and forty-nine pounds, sir. A fact. Well, did you find your friends whom you were looking for?"

"Yes—no," said Chester.

"Dear me; but is not that rather contradictory, my dear sir?" said the old man, smiling.

"Perhaps so, but there is a little mystery about the matter, sir," replied Chester. "By the way, though, can you tell me anything about your next-door neighbours?"

"My next-door neighbours, my dear sir," said the old man, smiling and rubbing his thin hands together softly; "well, not much, I am so unsociable a body; and here in London one can be so isolated. Let me see, he is something in the House of Commons—a clerk, or master-at-arms, or usher, or something."

"Mr Clareborough is?" cried Chester, sharply.

"No—no! That is on the other side. Quite a large family party. Very gay people who have plenty of fashionable callers, and carriages, and parties. I fancy they go a great deal to operas and theatres. The confectioner's people come sometimes, and musicians, and rout seats. Not in my way, my young friend—not in my way," continued the old gentleman in his quiet, amiable manner, as he took down the great bulky London Directory. "Yes, yes, yes; here we are—Highcombe Street, Clareborough. There's the name. Very wealthy, gay family, I believe. Clareborough. That's it, and I think I've heard somehow—I don't quite know how it was, unless one of the tradespeople told me—that they have a fine place somewhere in Kent—The Towers, I think they call it, and they are often down there, and this place is shut up. I like it to be, because it is so much more quiet for a man busy with his books."

"Have you—have you noticed anything peculiar about the family?" said Chester in a hesitating way.

The old man beamed upon him through his glasses, then took them off deliberately, and wiped each carefully with an old silk handkerchief, gazing at his questioner with his face wrinkled up as if he were puzzled.

"Anything peculiar?" he said at last. "Well, no, I think not, unless it is that they seem to spend a great deal of money in ephemeral pleasures. Yes, I remember now thinking that they must waste a great deal, and that with so much at their command they might accumulate a grand collection of books."

"Anything more?" said Chester.

"N-no, my dear sir. I think, now you mention it, that I have taken more notice of my neighbour on the other side. Yes, I am sure I have. I remember thinking how bad it must be for his health."

"Indeed?" said Chester, inquiringly, but with the intention of leading the old man back into talking about his other neighbours.

"Oh yes. You see, I often hear him coming home extremely late in the night. Twelve, one, and two o'clock, sometimes even by broad daylight. Not that I was watching him, but I often lie awake for hours, musing about some particular book that I have not obtained. I'm afraid I shall not sleep to-night for thinking of that book I missed at the sale to-day. But I put it to you, my dear sir; it was too much to give, was it not?"

"Certainly," said Chester, smiling, as he seized the opportunity to turn back the conversation to the other side; "but I suppose, according to your showing, the sum named would have been a trifle to your other neighbours."

"Hah! Yes, I suppose it would—yes, I suppose it would. But are you a collector?"

"I? Oh no," said Chester, smiling, "only a very ignorant body."

"No, no, no, no," said the old man, smiling pleasantly. "I know better than that. One gets to know what a person is more or less by his conversation, my dear sir, and I could vouch for it that you are a student."

"Well, I must own to that, more or less, as to medicine and surgery."

"I thought so, I thought so," said the old man, bending down to clasp his hands about one knee and sit as if thinking deeply over something, while Chester gladly availed himself of the silence to give free rein to his own thoughts.

For an idea had suddenly occurred to him which lit up his troubled brain like a flash of light.

He was in the next house—the old man leading his solitary life seemed pleased to have found someone ready to converse with him. Why should he not try and cultivate the old fellow's acquaintance, and take advantage of the opportunities it would afford him of watching his neighbours?

He had hardly thought this when the old man looked up, smiling at him in a child-like, pleasant way.

"How strange—how very strange it all is, my dear sir. Now, you will hardly credit me when I tell you that for some time past I have been suffering from little symptoms which at their frequent and more frequent recurrence suggest to me that I ought to consult a medical man."

"Indeed?" said Chester.

"Yes, my dear sir, indeed; but you see, I am a very old man now, and I fear that I have grown weak and vacillating; I may add cowardly too. I have shrunk from going to a doctor for fear that he should tell me that I must give up my studies—that I am failing and coming very near to the end of my span."

"Oh, surely not," said Chester. "You look a very healthy subject, sir."

"I—I don't know, my dear sir, but I have been afraid to go; and here, all at once, in the most casual way, I suddenly make the acquaintance of a medical man, and find him seated opposite to me, talking in a friendly way which quite invites my confidence. It is strange, is it not?"

"Very strange, indeed," said Chester, gazing hard in the pleasant, bland old countenance before him. "But really, my dear sir, I do not think you require medical advice."

The old man returned the fixed gaze and then said appealingly—

"I hope, my dear sir, you are speaking sincerely."

"Of course," replied Chester.

"Not as doctors sometimes do, to encourage their patients?"

"Certainly not," cried Chester. "There is every sign of a vigorous, green old age about you."

"That is very pleasant to hear, my dear sir," said the old man, "very pleasant. I don't think I am one ready to repine, or one who would seek to live for selfish considerations—love of pleasure or the like—but I have so much to do. I want years yet to complete my collection, and I may have to go over to Leyden, Leipsic, Nuremberg, Florence, and several of the other Continental towns which were the birthplaces of many of these old tomes which you see upon my shelves."

"I see no reason why you should not live for years yet, sir," said Chester, encouragingly.

"But my head—my brain. I find I grow forgetful, my dear sir. I put away books and forget their places. All little symptoms, are they not, of failing powers?"

"To be perfectly candid, certainly they are," said Chester; "but in a healthy old age these failings come very, very gradually, and nature suggests so many ways of palliating them. For instance, a clever young secretary with a methodical turn of mind would relieve you of a trouble like this. Really I do not think that you have any occasion to

trouble yourself about such a symptom as that, any more than you have about the failing powers of sight which compelled you to take to glasses."

"My dear young friend!" cried the old man, leaning forward to catch at his visitor's hand, "I cannot find words to express my gratitude. You do not know what a relief your words have been to me. It is wonderful, and upon such a casual acquaintanceship. But I sincerely hope that you will let me see more of you—er—that is, if I am not troublesome to you; such a wearisome old bookworm as I fear I must be. But the mouse helped the lion, you know, and who knows but what I may be able to help you with some information about your friends next door—let me see, I think you said it was the people next door whom you had been trying to find."

"I did not say so," said Chester, quietly.

"I beg your pardon; but you do wish to know something about them."

"Well, frankly, yes, I do," said Chester.

"Hah! And who knows but what I may be able to help you? I may remember something that does not occur to me now—a trifle or two perhaps, but which may be of importance from your point of view. Come and see me sometimes. Let me show you my library. I think you might be interested in some of my books."

"I have no doubt but that I should be."

"To be sure, yes. I have an old copy of Hippocrates on surgery and medicine, and I daresay many others which do not occur to me now. Yes, of course, I have Boerhaave. You will come?"

"I shall be very glad to," said Chester, warmly, though his conscience smote him for what he felt to be a false pretence.

"I am very, very glad," said the old man, rising, going to an old cabinet and pulling out a drawer, from which he took a key and at the same time something short and black which he cleverly thrust into the breast of his loosely-made, old-fashioned tail-coat. "Now I am about to ask a favour of you, doctor," he said, turning with a pleasant, genial smile upon his countenance. "I have other treasures here down below, besides books. Stored up and rarely brought out, bin after bin of very fine old wine. I am going to ask you to drink a glass of exceedingly old port with me."

"No, no," said Chester, "you must excuse me. I never drink wine at this time of day. Let me dine with you some time or other, and then—"

"Yes, of course, my dear young friend; I hope many times; but just one glass now. Don't say no. I feel to need it a little myself, for—don't think me a feeble old dotard—the fact of telling you of my weakness, of confessing to a doctor my fears of coming to an end, have upset my nerves a little, and I can't help fancying that a glass of good old wine would do me good."

"I am sure it would, sir," said Chester, warmly. "Well, there! I will break a rule, and join you in one glass."

"Hah!" cried the old man, brightening up; "that is very good of you, doctor—very good. I feel better already in anticipation. Now, let me see—let me see."

He opened the library table drawer and took out a box of matches and an old-fashioned, curled-up twist of wax taper, such as was the accompaniment of a writing-table in sealing-wax days, fifty years or so ago. This latter he lit, and then hung a large old key upon his little finger.

"The library next time you come, doctor; the cellar this time. A very fine cellar of wines, my dear sir, but wasted upon me. Just a glass now and then as a medicine. This way. I hope you will not mind the dust and cobwebs. An old-fashioned notion, but books seem to need the dust of ages, and it is precious upon them, just as old port ought to have its cobwebs and its crust. You will come with me to get a bottle?"

"Oh yes," said Chester, and he followed the old man out of the room into the book-encumbered hall, and along to the back, past chest and shelf, to where there was the glass door opening on the stone flight leading down into the basement.

"This way, my dear sir. One moment; there should be a basket here. Yes, here we are; would you mind lighting me? Thank you."

Chester took the wax taper and lighted the old man, while he took down from behind the glass door, where it hung upon a hook, one of those cradle-like baskets in which a bottle of rich old wine can recline without destroying its fineness.

"You see," said the old man, "I am a bit of a connoisseur. I like to keep my wine as it has lain in the bin. No decanting for me. Straight on down, my dear sir."

Chester did not hesitate, but led on down the stone stairs, holding the light on high, the tiny taper shining back upon a pair of flashing eyes and the wrinkles of a now wonderfully wrinkled face, while in the shadows behind a thin, claw-like hand glided to the breast-pocket of the old-fashioned coat, to draw out one of those misnamed weapons formed of twisted whalebone, ending in a weighty leaden knob.

Chester bore the light; behind him seemed to hover upon the dingy walls the Shadow of Death.

Chapter Nineteen.

By the Skin of his Teeth.

The Shadow passed away.

In another moment a crushing blow from a life-preserver, delivered by a vigorous arm, would have fallen upon the back of Chester's skull, and sent him headlong down the flight of stairs; but the deadly weapon was thrust back into its owner's breast, and the fierce, vindictive expression passed from his face as there was a violent ringing of the largest of the row of bells hanging to their right, and Chester turned sharply round, taper in hand, to look questioningly at the old man.

"Dear me!" he said, smiling, "how tiresome! This is one of the troubles of living quite alone, my dear young friend. I always have to answer my own door. I'm afraid that I must ask you to come back to the front room. Would you mind bringing the light? Thank you; I will take it."

He blew out the clear little flame as they reached the glass door, and then set down the basket, before leading the way back into the library, where he glanced from the window.

"Dear me!" he said. "More books. So very late in the day too. They always come at awkward times. Pray sit down or look at some of my works. You'll find something to interest you, I feel sure. Yes—yes; I'm coming," he said, as the bell rang loudly again. "Don't be so impatient, my good men, don't be so impatient."

"One moment; if you have business, I will go now," said Chester.

"Oh, by no means," said the old man. "I shall not be many moments. Pray take a book and my chair, there. It is only the railway men. I shall soon be done."

Chester did not take the chair, but began to inspect the dusty shelves, while he heard the front door open and after a time the sound of heavy feet upon the steps, and then the bump down of what sounded like a heavy chest. Then more steps outside, the rattle of a chain belonging to the tail-board of a van, and the steps again.

Then he ceased to hear anything that was going on, for his thoughts had run to the adjoining house and his experiences there, but only to be succeeded by an indescribable sensation of dread—a singular feeling of malaise which troubled his faculties. It was like a portent of something hanging over him, or over her who occupied so much of his thoughts.

"I can't stay here," he said to himself. "I must get out into the open air. This place makes me feel sick and faint."

He picked up one of the many books lying about, and threw it down again impatiently, to walk to the door, where he could hear the old student directing the men who had brought the consignment; while from the sounds it was evident that they were carrying the chests or whatever they were, down into the basement.

Feeling that it would be rude to interrupt his host then, he went back to the table.

"What is the matter with me?" he muttered, as he shivered involuntarily. "Is it from cold, or from over-thought and worry? Not going to be ill, am I, and at such a time?"

"I know," he thought, at the end of a few minutes; "it is this place. The air is close and mephitic. I don't believe the windows are ever open. I cannot stay here. I feel as if I should faint. Rude or not, I must go."

He had sunk into a chair, and now started up, just as the old man re-entered.

"Just done," he said cheerfully. "One moment. Heavy boxes, and these men like to have a glass. Not my old port, though. They would not appreciate it. A little of this—a little of this brandy."

He kept on talking softly as he took out a bottle and glasses from a cellarette, filled a couple, set the bottle down again, and carried the glasses out; and as the door swung to, Chester caught up the bottle quickly, held it to his lips, and gulped down a mouthful.

"Hah!" he muttered, as he set the brandy down and sank back in the chair; "that is stimulating. But how strange that I should feel like this. Ugh!"

He shuddered, for a cold chill ran through him, and the sensation of fear increased.

"Can it be something threatening her?" he muttered. "How strange! I have not felt like this since I lost my first patient," and the chill of coming dissolution seemed to hang in the air.

"Pooh! Fancy. It is a slight chill. That brandy will soon take it off."

The voices reached him again, and the steps were heard outside; then the front door was closed, and the old man came in smiling.

"Always at such inconvenient times," he said. "Generally when I am studying some intricate passage by an old author; but to-day when I have had my first visitor for months. I'm afraid you have found me very long."

"Oh no, don't name it," said Chester, hurriedly, "but—"

"Ah! your kindness of heart makes you speak thus," said the old man, hastily. "Two heavy chests of books, and I was obliged to make the men take them downstairs, or they would block the passage. But now for the glass of wine and our chat."

"I'm afraid that I shall be obliged to ask you to excuse me to-day," said Chester, who had risen.

"Oh, surely not," cried the old man in a disappointed tone. "I was reckoning so upon asking your opinion, my dear sir. Like liquid rubies. It will not take long."

"No, it would not take long," replied Chester, who now spoke rather excitedly, while the old man's eyes glittered strangely behind his glasses; "but I have been here some time now, and I must get back."

"But, my dear sir—"

"Don't press me, please. I, am rather unwell."

"You are not offended at my leaving you?"

"No, absurd!" cried Chester, hastily. "I have had a good deal of trouble lately, and my nerves have been shaken."

"Your nerves have been shaken?" said the old man, gazing at him in a peculiar way.

"Yes," said Chester; "but another day you must let me come; and perhaps you can tell me a little more about your neighbours."

The old man smiled sadly.

"Ah!" he said, "I am growing old and garrulous, and I have bored you, as you young people call it. You will not come again."

"Indeed, I will," cried Chester, holding out his hand to take his host's, which was extended unwillingly, and felt like ice. "Oh yes, I will come to-morrow or the next day. This is no paltry excuse. You may trust me."

"Ah, well, I will," said the old man, who seemed to be satisfied with his scrutiny. "Pray come, then, and put up with my strange, unworldly ways; and you must give me some more hints about my health. In the meantime I will look out some of the old medical and surgical works. You will find them interesting."

"Yes, I hope we shall spend many hours together," said Chester, frankly, as he moved toward the door, the old man walking by his side with his hands under the tails of his coat, where a looker-on would have seen that they were crooked and opening and shutting spasmodically.

It was very dim now in the book-burdened room, the evening light having hard work to pierce the uncleaned panes of the windows; but there was light enough to show that, and also that the old bookworm's claw-like right hand went into the coat-pocket and half drew from it something small and hard.

But nothing followed as they walked into the gloomy hall and away to the front door, where, after a friendly shake of the hand, Chester uttered a sigh of relief as he turned away from the house, seeming to breathe more freely as he walked briskly along.

"Pah! the old place felt like a sepulchre," he muttered. "It was just as if the hand of death were clutching at me. I believe that if I had not taken that brandy I should have fainted. What a state my nerves must be in. Why, it is the most fortunate thing that could have happened. Once gain the old man's confidence, I can stay there and watch the next house as long as I like."

There was something ominous about the old bookworm's act as he went softly back into his half-dark, dusty room, evidently thinking deeply, till he stopped short in the middle to stand gazing down at the floor.

"Yes, he said he was ill; he looked ill when he came up to the door—half mad. He will come back again, perhaps to-morrow—perhaps to-morrow. Hah! it was very near."

He raised his head now, went to the drawer from which he had taken the key, and placed back in it the heavy life-preserver, and then taking from the tail of the coat one of the short, old-fashioned pocket pistols which were loaded by unscrewing the little barrel by means of a key. This he examined, taking off the cap, after raising the hammer and putting a fresh one in its place. After this he closed the drawer and sat down to think.

"Yes," he said, half aloud, "it was very near. The next time he comes perhaps he'll stay. He is getting to be a nuisance, and a dangerous one, as well."

Chapter Twenty.

Strangely Mysterious Proceedings.

The Clareboroughs' carriage was at the door, and the well-matched, handsome pair of horses were impatiently pawing the ground, in spite of sundry admonitions from the plump coachman of the faultless turn-out to be "steady there!" "hold still!" and the like.

Mr Roach, the butler, had appeared for a minute on the step, looking very pompous and important, exchanged nods with the coachman, and gone in again to wait for the descent of their people, bound for one of Lord Gale's dinner-parties in Grosvenor Place.

All was still in the hall as the door was closed, and the marble statues and bodiless busts did not move upon their pedestals, nor their blank faces display the slightest wonder at the proceedings which followed, even though they were enough to startle them out of their equanimity.

For all at once the pompous, stolid butler and the stiff, military-looking footman, in his good, refined livery, suddenly seemed to have been stricken with a kind of delirious attack. The expression upon their faces changed from its customary social diplomatic calm to one of wild delight, and they both broke into a spasmodic dance, a combination of the wildest step of the *can-can* and the mad angulations of a nigger breakdown, with the accompaniment of snapping of fingers at each other and the final kick-up and flop of the right foot upon the floor.

Then they rushed at each other and embraced—the solemn, middle-aged butler and the tall young footman—theatrically, after which they seemed to come to their normal senses, and quietly shook hands.

"Bliged to let some of the steam off, old man?" whispered the footman.

"Yes, Orthur, my boy, had to open the safety valve," replied the butler. "We're made men, eh?"

"Not quite," said the footman, grinning, "but getting into shape. Three hundred a-piece. I say, ain't it grand?"

"Splendid," said the butler, with a broad smile. "But steady now."

"I say; wasn't the idea right?"

"Right as right, my boy."

"Ah," said the footman, with a knowing wink, "who'd be without a good only uncle to tip you when you want a few pounds to invest? I say, though, you'll go and pay the old boy as soon as we're gone?"

"Won't be time."

"Oh yes; you'll be all right. Get it done. Make it easy if we want to do it again, eh?"

"All right; I'll go. I say, Orthur, ain't I like a father to you?"

"Dear old man!" whispered the gentleman addressed, with a grin. "Me long-lost forther!"

"Steady!" said the butler, sternly, and their masks of servitude were on their faces again, with the elder stern and pompous, the younger respectful and steady as a rock. "Yes; I'll go and put that right. Must take a cab. You'll pay half?"

"Of course; that's all right, sir. Fair shares in everything. I say, Bob's got something else on. Hadn't a chance to tell you before."

"Eh? What is that?"

"Goodwood. He's had a letter. I say, shall we be on there? Oh no, not at all."

"Pst! coming down," whispered the butler; and the footman opened the door and went out to the carriage, which soon after dashed off, while the butler, after the regular glance up street and down, closed the door. He descended to his pantry, where he drew a glossy hat from a box, took an empty Gladstone bag from a cupboard and went out to hail the first hansom round the corner. This rattled him away in the direction of Bloomsbury, where he descended close to the great grim portico of the church, and told the man to wait.

The driver gave a glance at him, but the butler looked too respectable for a bilker, and he settled down for a quiet smoke, muttering, "Grapes or pears."

But cabby was wrong. Mr Roach was not the class of domestic to lower his dignity by engaging in a kind of commerce which could be properly carried on by the fruiterer. He made for a quiet street, turned up a narrow court, and passed in through a glazed swing door upon whose embossed pane appeared the blazon of the Medici family—the three golden pills—the crest of the generous relative—"mine uncle" of the borrower high and low, and the minute after he stood in darkness in a narrow box.

A sharp-faced young man with a pen behind his ear came from the right and stretched out his hand across the broad counter.

"Send the guv'nor," said Roach, importantly.

A sharp look was the answer, the shopman went away, and his place was taken directly by a keen, dark man, with a gaslight complexion, and to him Roach handed a little white ticket.

"Hullo! So soon!" said the man, showing his teeth, which matched his skin.

"Well, didn't I tell you so?" said Roach, importantly.

"Yes, but I don't quite believe everything my clients say."

"No, and you were precious uppish and hold-offish the other day," said Roach, shortly.

"Obliged to be careful, Mr Smith, in my profession," said the pawnbroker, with a peculiar smile. "There's a law against receiving stolen goods, and one don't want to get into trouble."

"Well, you needn't begin to suspect everybody who wants money, if there is. Do you suppose gentry don't run short of money sometimes?"

"Oh no. I know they do, Mr Smith. I could show you some jewellery that would open your eyes."

"And I dessay I could show you something that would open yours. May have to bring it to you some day. Who knows?"

"Glad to do business on the square any time, Mr Smith," said the pawnbroker.

"Of course you are; so's lots more. People thinks there's no card-playing going on now, and gents and ladies running short."

"We don't think so, Mr Smith."

"No, I suppose not," said Roach. "I did make up my mind I wouldn't come here again after what passed."

"Only business caution, Mr Smith."

"Oh, well, if that's all, perhaps I may. This was a commission; hundred pound wanted on the nail, and security worth five offered. Money's come in again, and my people want the security. Here's the cash and interest, and the sooner I'm off the better."

"Soon done, Mr Smith," said the pawnbroker, "and I shall be happy to do business with you again any time." The man made some memoranda on the card, and went into a back room to a safe, from which he brought a carefully-done-up packet.

"Rather I hadn't fetched it, eh?" said Roach, after having the packet opened and satisfied himself that the gold contents were intact.

"Don't you make that mistake, Mr Smith," said the pawnbroker. "We don't want unredeemed pledges to sell, but to have them taken out and receive our interest. That's the way money is made, sir."

"I dessay," said the butler, paying over the sum needed in notes and gold, and then packing the security in the Gladstone bag; "but it's a free country, and people have a right to believe what they like."

"Of course, my dear sir, of course."

"Now look here," whispered Roach; "if there happens to be an emergency, mister, and I'm disposed to come here again with something for an advance, is it to be prompt business, or a lot of humbugging questions?"

"Prompt business, Mr Smith, with approved customers, and to any amount."

"That will do then. I'll come. Private and confidential, eh?"

"Private and confidential, sir. Good-evening.—Jobson, shut up."

"Yes, and I shut him up," muttered Roach, as he went out with his Gladstone bag feeling weighty, and sought his cab, but not without looking back once or twice and choosing another way for his return.

But he saw nothing to excite his suspicions of being followed, for it was not likely that the homely-looking woman with a thickish umbrella had come from the pawnbroker's. But somehow she had.

An hour later, Roach's carefully-done-up parcel was denuded of its wrappings, and its golden glories were hidden in the iron plate-closet at the back of his pantry. And then he came upon Arthur, not long returned from setting down their people at Grosvenor Place.

"Hullo! Didn't know you'd come back. Got it?" said the footman.

The butler nodded.

"Shut the door," he said; and as soon as they were alone in the pantry, Roach unlocked the iron closet which contained the plate under his charge, and pointed to a handsome centre-piece standing on the shelf.

Then it was that the younger man so far forgot the respect due to his elder as to slap him on the back, an act not in the least resented, but responded to by a playful dig in the ribs.

"But I say, my boy," whispered the butler, "it won't do, you know. I've funk'd horribly for fear that they should ask for it."

"Likely!" said the footman, scornfully. "It's never been used but once."

"More likely to be asked for to be put away with the rest in the vault. Jemmy's safe to remember it some day."

The footman was thoughtful as the butler locked up the iron closet.

"We ought to put away something not likely to be asked for, eh?"

"Yes," said the butler, shaking his head sagely; "but what is there? We may have a dinner-party any day, and everything have to be shown."

"Must be lots of things in the vault."

"Course there is."

"I say, ain't it rum that they don't send the things to their bankers?"

"Not a bit, when they've got a strong closet of their own, Orthur, my boy. I heard 'em talking about it one day at dinner, and Jemmy said something about their old bank breaking, and a lot of the family plate and jewels being lost. The rogues had been hard up for long enough and sold it."

"Ah! there's a sight o' rogues in the world," said Arthur, quietly.

"We've got some capital now."

"Yes, but let's think of a rainy day. Now, look here, there must be no end of things in the vault as they're never like to

ask for.”

“No end,” said the butler.

“Never been in it?”

“Never.”

“Well, couldn’t we have a look in, and pick out something small and handy?—say jools. They do lock them there when they go down to The Towers. I do know that.”

“Yes, my lad, they do; and I believe there’s a lot of old gold, family plate and diamonds as they never do want.”

“That’s the stuff for us—in case we want it, of course. Don’t hurt them to borrow it, and it finds us the capital to do us good.”

“Yes, but how are we to get at it?”

“Keys.”

“Where are they kept?”

“Oh, we could soon find out that.”

“Well, I can’t. I’ve been on the look-out this two years, and I believe Jemmy keeps ’em somewhere, but I never could find out where.”

“Then you had thought of that plan, old man?”

“Of course I had. Where you ain’t trusted it sets you thinking. They’re well-bred, but somehow the Clareboroughs ain’t real gentlemen. They trust me with some of the plate, and I’m supposed to be butler, but what about the wine? Do they ever let me have the key of the cellar?”

“No, that’s Bob’s job,” said the footman, thoughtfully.

“Yes, and a couple of paltry dozen at a time. How am I to know if the wine’s keeping sound or not? But there are ways, Orthur,” continued Roach, with a wink, and he rose slowly, went to a chest of drawers, unlocked it, took out a box, unlocked that, and drew forth a couple of new-looking keys.

“Hullo!” said the footman in a whisper; “cellar?”

“That one is,” replied the butler, as his companion turned over the big bright key he had taken up.

“Good. And what’s this?”

“One I got made to try the vault.”

“Phe-ew!” whistled Arthur, excitedly. “Then you have been in?”

“No, my lad; that only opens the wooden door at the end of the passage. Then you’re in a bit of a lobby, with a big iron door on one side.”

“Well, didn’t you get a key made for that?”

“No, my lad. I couldn’t. It’s a rum one. I don’t believe you could get one made by anybody but them as sold the safe.”

“Don’t believe it,” cried the footman, contemptuously, “Let me have a look.”

“Nay, nay, you’d better not.”

“Gammon. Where’s the old woman?”

“In her room, up atop.”

“Who’s in the kitchen?”

“Only the scullery-maid. T’others are all gone out.”

“Then let’s go and have a look,” cried Arthur. “I want to be a man. I’m sick of being a mouse.”

The butler seemed disposed to sit still, but the energy of his young companion stirred him to action, and he placed the keys in his pocket and stood hesitating.

“Go and see first what that gal’s doing,” he whispered, “while I make sure the old woman’s up in her room.”

The footman nodded, and both went their ways, to meet again with a nod indicating that all was right, and then the butler led on along one of the passages of the extensive basement to where another struck off at right angles, ending in an ordinary stout oak-grained door. This readily yielded to the key the butler brought, and after lighting a bit of candle the pair stepped into a little stone-walled room of about ten feet square, with a closely-fitting drab-painted door on their right, standing flush with the iron frame which filled up the centre.

"That's a tight one, Orthur, lad," said the butler.

"Yes, to them as has no key," said the footman, quietly, after going down on one knee and examining the key-hole by holding the loose cover on one side. "I'm a-going to have a key to fit that lock, old man, afore long."

"You are, my boy?"

"I am, guv'nor. You and I's got together and we've got to stick together and make our fortunes. There's horses and carriages and plate chests and cellars o' wine for them as likes to be enterprising, and we're enterprising now."

"But we mustn't do anything shady, Orthur."

"Shady, guv'nor!" cried the footman, contemptuously; "not us. It's to be sunshiny. Don't you be afraid o' that. We sha'n't do nothing to make us afraid to look a bobby in the face. Only a bit of speckylation—a bit o' borrowing now and then to raise the wind, and paying of it back. Give us your hand on it, old man. We sticks together through thick and thin."

There were vinous tears in the butler's eyes as he extended his plump white hand to be grasped hard, and the two speculators looked each in the other's face, seeing a gilded future before them, the glare of which hid everything else.

"That'll do for the present, guv'nor," said Arthur.

He drew open the door, and was about to pass out, when a short cough came echoing along the passage, and he pushed the door close again.

"Hist!" he whispered, as he blew out the light; "the old woman's coming down."

"Quick! take out the key, and lock it from inside," whispered the butler. "She's always coming along here to see if this place is all right and try the door."

The footman obeyed, making a faint rattle with the key, after which he closed the door, leaving them in darkness.

"Have you locked it?"

"No, there ain't no key-hole on this side. Hist! she's coming straight here."

The next moment the footman's shoulder was placed against the door to keep it fast.

The men stood holding their breath and feeling the perspiration gather upon their faces like a heavy dew, as they waited, hearing nothing now but the throbbing of their own hearts for what seemed to be an interminable time, before there came the sound as of something soft being dabbed against the door, followed by a sudden heavy push which, in spite of his strength, sent a jarring thrill through every nerve of the footman's body.

Chapter Twenty One.

Going Shares.

Mr Roach confessed to being an admirer of the fair sex; and consequent upon his position, not from any special attraction of mind or person, the butler's advances were in more than one instance favourably received; but he also confessed, in the strictest personal confidence, to a feeling of jealousy against Arthur.

"He's big, and he's not bad-looking, but he's very weak and young, and there's a want of manly tone about him. I can't see why they should make so much fuss over the fellow."

"They" embraced the lady members of the Clareborough household staff; and in spite of what the butler might say, Arthur was distinctly high in favour and enjoyed his popularity.

There were reasons, of course, more than the great display of affability, and one day Mr Roach took his fellow-servant seriously to task.

"Look here, Orthur, my lad," he said confidentially; "you're having a fine old time of it just now, but recollect this: the sex is soft, and smooth, and pleasant, and as you may say sweet, but don't you make a mistake and think that girls are fools."

"I don't," said Arthur, complacently—"Old boy's a bit jealous," he added to himself.

"Then don't act as if you did. They're sharp enough, and before long they'll begin talking. One of 'em 'll be jealous of you taking out another, and then out'll come the claw from the soft paws, and there'll be a row."

"Well, they must settle it among themselves if there is."

"But don't you see that the disappointed one that you've made an enemy 'll begin to talk nasty-like and she'll know what your wages are."

"Eh?"

"That's it, my boy; she'll be wanting to know how you can be treating some of 'em to music-halls, and paying for cabs and railway fares, and supper afterwards, on five pound a quarter."

"Dash it!" cried Arthur.

"Yes, that's it, my lad. You and me's doing very nicely just now; don't spoil a good thing. See what I mean?"

"Yes, I see what you mean, old chap," said Arthur, who had suddenly become sobered.

"That's right. You see, you gave Maria Blay a gold watch."

"Only a second-'and 'un, and I bought the pawn-ticket cheap."

"Maybe, but there's a big sound about a gold watch. Then you gave cook a brooch, and Betsy Dellow a gold ring, and it ain't wise, my lad, it ain't wise. We're on the road to fortune, so don't you get looking back for the sake of a bit of nonsense, or you and me may have to part. Don't do foolish things."

"No, Mr Roach, I won't, sir. I'm very sorry, and I'll be a bit more careful."

"That's right, Orthur," said the butler, importantly. "I shouldn't like for anything to come between us two."

"Of course not, sir. It wouldn't do," cried the footman, eagerly.

"Got anything new?"

"Well, no, Mr Roach, sir. I haven't seen the chance of a tip lately."

The butler smiled triumphantly.

"You don't mean to say you have, sir?"

"But I do, Orthur," he replied in a hoarse whisper. "It isn't Mr Rob's or Mr Paddy's this time, but a put-up thing of the gov'nor's."

Arthur whistled in his excitement.

"It means a big stroke, Orthur. I've got the tip, and if you and me's got the pluck to do it we're made men."

"Oh, we've got the pluck," said the footman, huskily. "What's the 'orse?"

"Not a horse at all, my lad. It's a company. They're working it to rights, and I've found out all about it, Orthur. I've seen the letters. They're going to blow the thing up full of wind, and buy up all the shares they can. Then when the thing's at the height, they sell, and make thousands."

"Phew!" whistled the footman.

"S'pose we make a couple o' thou, a-piece; that's better than backing horses."

"Yes; but could we?"

"Don't they, my lad? Isn't all this place run that way? Why shouldn't we do it as well as them? They ain't so precious clever after all."

"Not as I see," said the younger man, contemptuously.

"Then what do you say? Shall we venture?"

"I'm on," said Arthur, eagerly. "How much does it want?"

"Two hundred a-piece. How much have you got?"

The footman gave him a curious look, and then said drily—

"Nothing at all."

"Why, you don't mean to say you've spent all we've made, Arthur?"

"Every penny. Haven't you?"

The butler was silent, and frowned; but his companion followed up his question.

"Well, why don't you answer a fellow?"

"I haven't exactly spent it, Orthur," said the butler at last, coughing to clear his voice.

"Well, what have you done with it?"

"'Orses."

"Without saying a word to me?"

"Well, I didn't know I was bound to tell you everything, Orthur."

"Well, I did; and it serves you right. If you'd gone by my advice and taken my tips you'd ha' won."

"Yes, it was a mistake," said the butler, humbly. "I was tempted to have just one little flutter on my own account, Orthur."

"Well, don't you do it again. That's worse than giving the gals presents, old man. Then I suppose it will have to be your uncle again?"

"Yes, Orthur; but it's a pity we couldn't manage about a key for that door."

"Ah! it is; but it ain't to be done, only with a big hammer and wedges, I'm afraid. I'm trying still, though, to get a key made, and it may turn up trumps. Never mind; raise something on what you can take."

"But it won't be enough, my boy."

"Never mind; let's do what we can. A little's more than none. Half a loaf's better than no bread, old man."

"Very well, my boy; I'll take what I can to-night."

"I say, you're sure this'll turn out all right?"

"Certain. It's as safe as safe. I'll make him let me have a little more—put something else up—and then we'll take all the shares we can get."

"And about selling out at the right time?"

"You leave that to me," said the butler, smiling confidently. "Look here."

He took out a letter and held it to his companion, who read it with his face lighting up, and clapped it back in the butler's hands.

"That's right, isn't it?" said Roach.

"Splendid, old man. But stop; why, that's your writing."

"Of course it is; I copied it."

"Oh, I see. Well, then, that's all right. Go on ahead."

"But I wish it wasn't that centre-piece again. I'm always afraid of its being wanted."

"Oh, it won't be wanted," said the footman, impatiently.

"If you could only have managed about that key."

"Well, give me time. I say, that was a narrow squeak, when the old woman nearly caught us."

"Yes, it was horrible," said the butler, wiping his forehead. "Fancy her telling Jemmy, and him sending for us to come up in the lib'ry afore the lot of them!"

"Easy enough for him to send," said the footman, with a grin, "but it would have taken a lot of pulling to get us there."

"Yes, Orthur, my boy, the game would have been up."

"And before we'd made our pile, old man. There, you want a glass of wine to pull you together. You mustn't go and see our dear old relative looking like that."

"No," said Roach, brightening up; "that would not do, Orthur. The old woman did not find us out."

"I held the door too fast for her, and a miss is as good as a mile, eh, guv'nor? I say, old man, don't you think we might wet it?"

The butler smiled blandly.

"Well, just one glass wouldn't be amiss, my boy. What shall it be?"

"Can't beat a glass o' port, old man. What do you say?"

"I say ditto, my dear boy," and the butler, smiling, drew out his keys, unlocked a cupboard, lifted out a cobwebby bottle with a dab of whitewash on its end, and with a great deal of ceremony drew the cork, while Arthur fetched and gave a finishing touch to a couple of glasses as the cork was presented to him.

But it was only to smell, and Arthur inhaled the fragrance and sighed. Then the rich wine came gurgling out into the glasses, and these latter were raised.

"Well, old man, here's success to speculation," said Arthur.

"Suck-cess to speculation," said the butler, and the glasses were slowly drained. Lips were smacked and the glasses refilled. "A very fine wine, Orthur."

"Tip-top. How much is there of it?"

“Over six hundred dozen, my lad.”

“Well, we’ll help ‘em drink it, old man. It’s fine. Sets a fellow thinking. Now, look here. We’re not going to stand still, eh?”

“Not a bit of it, dear boy. We’ll make our hay while the sun shines.”

“Ah, yes,” said the butler, filling another glass of the port; “and some people shoot a long time before folks get hit, eh, Orthur?”

“That’s so, guv’nor; you’ve only to keep going, and the chances are that they can’t hit you at all.”

The result of the emptying of that bottle of wine was that the gold epergne and several other pieces of plate went into the charge of the none too particular descendant of the Medici, a gentleman who, having been exceedingly unfortunate in carrying on what he called a square trade, had of late gone in for the risky and round, with the result that he was making money fast, and calming his conscience by chuckling to himself and saying—

“What harm is there, so long as you’re not found out?”

That evening Mr Roach returned with a sufficient amount to dip slightly into the new speculation in which the Clareboroughs were engaged, but he did not sleep any better for that. He dreamed about brokers who dealt in stock, and by a steady descent of thought he went on to brokers who put executions into houses. They suggested debtors’ prisons—debtors’ prisons brought up Holloway, and Holloway the criminal side—the criminal side, penal Portland, with irons, and costumes ornamented with broad arrows, shortcut hair, chain-gangs, and an awakening in a violent perspiration.

Mr Roach had no appetite next morning, but on behalf of footman Arthur and himself, a couple of hundred pounds were invested in the shares of the gaseous company which had nothing whatever to do with gas.

Chapter Twenty Two.

Man Masters.

“At last!” muttered Chester, as he stood, pale and careworn, leaning upon the iron rail in the Row, watching the carriages slowly filing by, or stopping from time to time.

For after days and days of watching, he was once more about to give up in despair and venture, in spite of all rebuffs, upon another call at the house, when in the distance he caught sight of the Clareborough’s light victoria approaching, and to his great delight he found that it only contained one occupant.

He hesitated for a few moments as to what he should do—wait, or advance to meet it, and decided now upon a bold attack, for every nerve was on the strain.

“I will not be put off this time,” he said to himself. “She shall acknowledge me.”

As he approached his heart began to beat fast and he gazed upon the elegantly-dressed figure leaning carelessly back with her face shaded by the tinted parasol she held, and, as yet unobserved, Chester saw that she looked pale, troubled and weary, her half-closed eyes dreamy and thoughtful.

Fate favoured him, for there was a block somewhere ahead, and the horses were stopped only a few yards away.

He passed under the rail, walked up quickly, still unobserved, till his hand was upon the carriage door.

“Marion!” he whispered.

She gave a violent start, the blood suffused her cheeks, and then fled, leaving her deadly pale, as she gazed at him with dilating eyes.

“I beg your pardon,” she said coldly, “you addressed me?”

“Yes,” he said in a low voice which trembled a little from the excess of his emotion, “but we are alone now, Marion. For pity’s sake let there be an end to this.”

“Ah, I remember,” she said in her low, musical tones, “you are the strange gentleman who addressed me before. You are repeating your mistake, sir.”

“Indeed!” he said reproachfully, as he fixed her eyes with his. “Do you think I could ever be mistaken?”

She bowed slightly and drew a little back, glancing hurriedly at the driver, and then looking ahead as if eager for the carriage to proceed.

“How can you be so cruel?” he whispered. “Marion, you are maddening me!”

He saw her wince, but with wonderful self-command she sat rigid as she said slowly—

“I beg, sir, that there may be an end of this. Can you not see that you are making a mistake, and are insulting an unprotected woman?”

She looked him fully in the eyes now with a calm air of wonderment, and for the moment he was in doubt.

But the next moment his heart said no, and his pulses increased their beat. No accidental resemblance could have

produced that effect upon him. He knew that there was something which he could not explain—a strange vitality or occult force which bound him to her, and, though his eyes might have erred, his nature could have made no such blunder, and he was eager to continue the attack now the opportunity was there.

“Mistaken?” he said in a low, impassioned tone; “how could I be mistaken? From the first moment you came to me, your looks, the tones of your voice in your appeal to me for help, awoke something which till then had slumbered within me. I had lived in ignorance of the reality of such a passion, one which has gone on growing like a torrent ever since. It has swept all before it since the hour I knew that I had found my fate.”

“My good sir,” she said firmly and gently; “indeed you are taking me for someone else.”

He smiled as he gazed at her intently.

“For whom?” he said.

“I cannot say; some friend. It is an accidental resemblance, and once more—I appeal to you as a gentleman to cease this persecution.”

He shook his head sadly.

“Accidental resemblance? No. There is but one Marion on earth. No woman ever resembled you in any way. This is impossible. Marion, be merciful. After the night on which I saw you last, what must you think of me? Of what manner of man could I be if, after striving so hard to gain an interview like this, I could let you throw me over in so cruel a way? Marion, for pity’s sake. There must be stronger reasons than I already know of to make you act like this.”

She glanced round wildly for a moment or two, as if in dread that they were being observed and his words were taking the attention of the people around, then up at the coachman, but he sat erect and stolid, too well schooled in his duties to have a thought or eyes for anything but the beautiful pair of horses under his charge. Then, as she realised the fact that they were perfectly unobserved by the busy throng around, she recovered her passing composure, and said quite calmly, and with a suggestion of pity in her tone for one who seemed to her to be suffering from some slight mental aberration—

“Can you not see that you are mistaken?”

“No,” he said, smiling sadly; “only that it is impossible.”

There was a faint quiver of the lips, but it passed off, and her beautiful eyes flashed, and the colour rose in her cheeks, as she made a strong effort to be firm. Then there was a touch of anger in her voice as she said coldly—

“Must I appeal to someone passing, sir, or to one of the police?”

Her words stung him to the quick, “No,” he whispered huskily; “there is no need. If you are made of steel and can act to me like this, I must suffer; but do not insult me by treating me as if I were insane. I could bear it from your brother; not from you, Miss Clareborough.”

She winced slightly at the utterance of her name, and he fancied that there was the light of compassion for one brief moment in her eyes.

His own face hardened now in the bitterness and despair of the moment as he took out his pocket-book, and in spite of her self-command she watched his action narrowly as he drew out the carefully-folded handkerchief stained with blood.

“I saved this inadvertently,” he continued. “Yours; marked with your initials.”

He looked her full in the eyes as he spoke, bitterly now.

“When I found it where I had hurriedly thrust it into my pocket that night, it seemed to offer itself as an excellent clue for the police to track out the mystery of the house to which I was taken.”

She leaned forward quickly and caught at the handkerchief to cover it with her hand, while he still retained his hold.

“For God’s sake, no!” she whispered, and her face convulsed with fear. “Don’t do that—the police!”

The stained scrap of cambric formed a bond between them as he gazed deeply in her eyes now, while a faint smile dawned upon his lip.

“I checked the thought at once,” he said softly. “I told myself that such an act might hurt you—might give you pain; and I set to and tried to track you without, all through the months of agony and dread for what you might have to fear from him. Take it, to destroy or save, as you will. It is yours; but do not do me the injustice to think I would retain it to hold over you in terrorem. Marion, I love you too well.”

He breathed these words in the faintest tones, but he could read that they fell heavily upon her ears, for in spite of her rigid position he saw that her eyes looked wildly and imploringly into his.

“For Heaven’s sake be silent!” she whispered faintly.

“I am your slave,” he said softly. “Take the handkerchief.”

“No, no; I trust you,” she whispered back. “I will not try to dissimulate any longer. It is impossible; but you must never speak to me again—never recognise me. I cannot explain—I am not my own mistress. It would injure others. Be merciful to me, for I have suffered deeply. Think of all that has passed as some dream. I cannot—must never see you more.”

The carriage began to move on, but he walked by the side as she continued—

“Spare me—spare those I love. I ask it of you. Now, farewell for ever, for your own sake—for mine.”

“No,” he said softly, as he walked on, unnoticed by the many they passed, for it was a commonplace thing enough to see a gentleman by a carriage door talking to its occupant. “No. You have made me more happy than I can express. The dense black cloud that has been over my life has passed away, for I know now that you have been wearing this mask for the sake of others whom you wish to spare. But you have let me see behind it; just one glimpse, but enough to show me the true nature of the woman I love.”

“Oh, hush!” she whispered. “Believe me, that is impossible. Now leave me, pray.”

“Nothing is impossible to a man who loves as I love you,” he whispered.

“No, no; once more, I tell you that we must never meet again.”

“And I tell you,” he whispered back, “that you are part of my life, and that while my heart beats I will never give you up. Marion, we must meet again sooner or later; I live for nothing else. Your hand one moment.”

“No, no!” she moaned.

“Your hand—life of my life,” he whispered softly; and as she gazed at him wildly, her hand, as if drawn by the magnetism of his nature, glided slowly into his, and was clasped in his nervous grasp.

“I am going to wait.”

“No,” she said more firmly. “This for the last time. They would kill me—they would kill you.”

“No,” he said. “An hour ago I would have welcomed death; now life opens before me in its fullest sunshine of joy. They shall not kill you; they shall not kill me, for I know you love me and have suffered, and it has made me strong.”

“Impossible, impossible,” she whispered, with her eyes fixed upon his.

Then he loosed his hold of her gloved hand, dropping back and raising his hat as the carriage rolled on.

He stood and watched it for a few minutes till it had passed out of sight, and then drawing himself up, feeling that a breach of invigorating life had run through his being, he turned to walk back across the path, and found himself nearly confronting the man who had occupied so much of his waking thoughts, and whose eyes now seemed to flash as they gazed fiercely in his.

“Well,” said Chester to himself, as he set his teeth hard, “I am ready for the worst. Am I to learn the mystery of the big house now?” And he took a step forward to meet the man he felt to be the great enemy of both their lives.

Chapter Twenty Three.

The Game is up.

To Chester’s surprise James Clareborough’s face hardened and grew stony as they approached, and the next moment he had passed him without a word or the slightest sign of recognition, and when, stung by jealous solicitude for the woman he loved, Chester turned and followed, he saw his enemy take another direction to that in which Marion was being driven.

Then days passed—then weeks; and in spite of constant watchfulness Chester could not get a glimpse of her who filled his thoughts. The reason was patent—the family had left town, and he had once more to track them out. But this was easy, and in a day or two he was down at the nearest spot where he could unobserved obtain lodgings, ostensibly trout fishing the stream that meandered by The Towers, the Clareboroughs’ Kentish estate.

Still he could not obtain a second interview. He knew, though, that which filled him with exultation and patience to wait—he was loved.

There were troubles at The Towers in the lower stratum, all connected with speculation; and, though money was worthless in these days in Chester’s eyes, the speculation affected his fate.

It was in this wise:—

Roach looked puffy, and especially so beneath the eyes, where a couple of pendulous bags disfigured his important-looking countenance.

Unkind people would have said that the flushed aspect was due to drinking, but he was perfectly steady as he got out of a hansom cab, in company with Arthur, after a short run up to town, where they had arrived by a fast train that afternoon, and taking the two small, light portmanteaus which the driver handed down, each threw his overcoat across his arm, and they walked together round the corner into Highcombe Street, made for the Clareboroughs’ town house, tried the area gate, which, as they expected, was locked, and went up the steps to the front door.

“How do you feel, Arthur?” whispered Roach.

“Right as the mail, old man. Now then, no gammon. You keep your pecker up, and do the talking, and I’ll do the business. There’s nothing to mind.”

“Nothing to mind?” said Roach, as he raised his hand towards the servants’ bell, but did not ring.

"Only the handcuffs if we don't do what we want and clear off."

Roach groaned.

"Don't be a fool, old man," whispered the footman. "As I told you, we must do it now. The game's up, and you know what Jemmy is. There'll be no mercy, so let's make our hay while the sun shines. Pull the bell."

With trembling hand Roach rang the servants' bell, and then drew a deep breath.

"That's right, old man, pull yourself together. Think it's going to be a lark, and after it a fortune for us both."

"Yes, I'm going to be firm now," growled Roach, hoarsely. "It's our only chance, Orthur, so stand by me."

"Like an iron post, old man. That's the way, jolly's the style. Here she comes."

They caught a glimpse of the housekeeper at the side window, and directly after the door was open.

"Good-morning, ma'am," began the butler.

"Good-morning, Mrs Barron, ma'am," said Arthur.

She looked sternly from one to the other, without making way for them to enter.

"Why are you two men up in town?" she said harshly.

"Well, the fact is, ma'am, I had a little bit o' business to do about my savings in the sweet threes, and as the gentlemen were all in Paris, and the ladies were not expecting any company, I made so bold as to ask Mrs James Clareborough to spare me till to-morrow night and let Orthur come with me, for I don't like going through money matters without a witness."

"Oh," said the housekeeper, speaking with her lips very close together, but without drawing back. "Then why have you both come here? This is not a broker's."

"No, ma'am, of course not," said Arthur, with a little laugh.

"I was not speaking to you, sir," said the housekeeper, turning upon him suddenly. "Have the goodness to keep your place."

"Certainly, ma'am. Beg pardon, ma'am."

"Now, Mr Roach; what do you want here?"

"Want here, ma'am?" stammered the butler; "want here? Why, I can't go to my broker without my warrants."

The housekeeper's pale face looked more pinched than ever as she gazed searchingly at the other, who looked completely taken aback; and then she darted a sharp glance at Arthur, who evidently expected it and did not look, but busied himself in bringing a little bit of vanity well into sight, the said piece of vanity taking the shape of a couple of bronze fox-head cuff studs, which he drew beyond the sleeves of his coat.

"You can go down into your pantry and get what you require," said the housekeeper, coldly, and she made way for the butler to enter. Arthur was about to follow. "No," she said sharply, "you can wait."

"Wait—here, ma'am?"

"Yes," said the housekeeper, decisively, and she made as if to shut the door. "Or, no; you can sit down inside."

Arthur brightened up, and stepped in jauntily, the housekeeper closing the door.

"You need not take your portmanteau down with you, Roach."

"No, ma'am, of course not," said the butler, respectfully.

"Here, I'll mind that, Mr Roach, sir," said the footman, stepping forward to take the valise, after standing his own on end.

The butler was a few steps in the hall, the housekeeper between them, and a little on Arthur's right, as he took a step forward, taking his overcoat from his arm and shaking it out the while, as if about to double it afresh. Then, quick as thought, he stepped aside, threw it over the woman's head, and twisted it together. "Now, old man; her legs, sharp!"

Roach stood for a moment as if bewildered. Then at an oath from his companion, he stepped forward, threw his arms round the struggling woman's legs, lifted her up, and in spite of her smothered cries bore her right to the end of the passage.

"Down with her; pantry," said the footman, sharply, and they carried her quickly down the basement to the butler's pantry, where they laid her on the table.

"Fetch the trunks, old man," said Arthur, loudly. "I can manage. Quiet, you old cat, or I'll choke you!"

He tightened the coat with a couple, of twists as he spoke, but the faint cry continued.

"Bah! let her squeak; she might howl for a month, and no one could hear."

This, for the butler looked unnerved. He went up directly, though, and as soon as he was gone Arthur put his face to the coat, close to the old lady's ear.

"You just listen," he said. "You've had your innings, and led me a pretty devil of a life with your nasty ways. It's my turn now. Quiet, curse you! Stop that row, or as sure as you're a living woman now, you'll want a coffin to-morrow."

"What—what is it you want. Money?" came faintly.

"Never you mind what we want, old girl. There, you needn't kick and struggle; we don't want to carry you off and marry you by force, so lie still. Ah, that's right; look sharp. My Gladstone, not yours. Get out the rope."

The butler, whose face was now mottled with white patches, opened one of the portmanteaus and took out a cord.

"Now come here and lay hold. If she begins to squeal again, tighten your grip a bit."

But the woman lay perfectly still now, and she did not even wince when the footman twisted the rope tightly round her ankles and knotted it fast.

"Now then, over on her face, guv'nor. I must have these wrists tied behind, or she may begin to scratch."

The helpless woman was turned over, her wrists firmly secured, and she was then laid on her side and the coat taken off, to reveal her wide, staring eyes, and teeth set, with the lips drawn right away.

"You've killed her, my boy," whispered the butler in a hoarse voice.

"Bah! Old cats like that have got nine lives," said the man, contemptuously. "Here, give me a clean glass cloth, and I'll shove a gag in her mouth."

"No, no. She's bad enough as it is," whispered the butler. "Let her be."

The footman looked at the old housekeeper dubiously, and then unwillingly gave up his project.

"Shall we put her in the plate-closet? I have the key."

Arthur laughed.

"Why, that would smother her in half an hour. No; help me to lay her down on the hearth-rug. We can come and look at her now and then. But she won't move. We've pretty well frightened her to death."

Judging from appearances, this was the case, and after laying the unfortunate woman on the hearth-rug, they took portmanteaus and coats and hurried out into the main passage, then into that which went off at right angles, to stop in front of the lobby door.

Chapter Twenty Four.

And Grows Dangerous.

The key the men possessed admitted them at once and the other portmanteau was opened, ready for use—a use which soon became plain.

"Think it'll be all right this time?" said Roach, who was in an intense state of excitement.

"Dunno till I try," was the reply. "Light up and look sharp."

Roach turned to the second portmanteau, which stood inside the door, and took out a dark lantern. Then striking a match, he lit it, and in obedience to a word from his young companion, he held up the cover of the iron door key-hole with one hand, and directed the full glare of the bull's-eye on the opening with the other.

Arthur had not been idle. Hastily doubling his overcoat, he made of it a pad to kneel upon, and then taking a bright new key from out of a piece of tissue paper, he began to try if it would fit.

"All right," he whispered, "it goes splendidly."

"Well done," panted Roach. "But be quick."

"Quick be blowed! Don't you be so jolly nervous; there's no one to interrupt us now."

"Well, turn the key."

"Won't turn—sticks. Oil."

Roach handed a little oil tin from the portmanteau, the key was withdrawn and lubricated and once more thrust in, to evidently act upon a part of the mechanism of the great lock, but that was all.

"Bah!" ejaculated Arthur. "I know the beggar. It's one of that sort you see at the safe shops. When you turn the key you shoot bolts, top, bottom and both sides. It nearly does. He made it quite to the wax pattern, and it only wants a touch or two. Here, give us the file."

"Stop a minute."

"What's the matter?"

"I want to see if old Mrs Barron's safe."

"Look alive then. No, no; give me the file first."

The tool was handed and the active young fellow held the key close to the light and began filing away where it seemed to him the wards of the key wanted opening; and he was still busy when Roach returned. "She's all right," he panted, his breath coming short as if he had been running.

"Oh yes, she won't get clear of those knots—an old cat!—I know. You take it easy, old man; we're as safe as safe."

"But suppose the guv'nors come back from Paris, my dear boy?"

"Won't be back for a fortnight. You know as well as I do. Lor' 'a' mussy! on'y think of our taking up a game like this, old man!"

"It's awful—it's awful, Orthur."

"Yah! we can't help it. How were we to know that everything we backed would go wrong and leave us in such a hole?" said Arthur, as he filed away.

"But it seems like burglary," whispered the butler.

"Burglary be blowed! Look here, if you're going to whine I shall cut it, and my stick too, and you may face it out with the guv'nors. What are you going to say when they ask after that gold centre-piece, and the rest of the plate you've lent my uncle?"

"We've lent my uncle!" said the butler, reproachfully.

"Oh, well, we then. I'm ready to take my share. It was their fault, and we're driven to this to get money to take out all you've pledged."

"We've pledged."

"We be hanged! You did the pledging, but I don't want to back out of it. I'm going to stand by you. Only, you see, circumstances are against us, old man. We meant to come quietly and get enough out of here to square us and make us able to make a fresh start on our own hook—I'm sick of their tips—but as soon as we come to do it quietly, meaning to sleep here for the night, that old cat cuts up rough, and we have to quiet her. Consequence is, old man, we've got to go the whole thing and make ourselves rich men all at once. Don't matter. Just as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, so I mean to make it two sheep if I can—two sheep a-piece, old chap. There, that ought to do it now."

He ceased filing and applied the key again, to find that he could turn it a little more.

"Almost," he said. "Oil again."

But the fresh oil sent it no farther, and the butler wiped his dripping brow and ejaculated—

"Tut-tut-tut-tut!"

"Look here, old chap, if you can do it better come and try yourself," cried Arthur in an ill-used tone.

"No, no, my dear boy, I can't. You are cleverer at such things than I am, but it's such fidgeting work to stand here holding the light and doing nothing."

"Never mind, it's worth it," said Arthur, laughing. "Think of the pearls and diamonds in here, old fellow. Now for another try. We shall be as rich as Rothschilds when we've done, and across the water before they can put a hand upon us. Bah! Blister the key! It's as near as near. But I'll do it, if I try till to-morrow morning. Here, go and see how the old girl's getting on. Got your keys?"

"Yes, my boy, but they are no good for this."

"Pah! who said they were? They're good for a bottle of wine, though, ain't they?"

"Oh yes—yes!"

"Then bring one with the cork out, and never mind a glass; and don't stop to decant it, old chap, for I want a drink horrid bad. This is warm work."

The butler went away on tip-toe. As he walked along the passage he heard the sharp grating of the file, and shivered with dread. But upon reaching the pantry he felt relieved, for the housekeeper seemed to be asleep.

Not content with this, Roach went up to the hall and listened. But all was perfectly still in the great solemn mansion, and he went down again, to be conscious of the scrap, scrap of the file, before he reached the pantry, where the old lady still lay unmoved.

Hastily getting a bottle of wine from the cupboard, and uncorking it, he went back, to find Arthur still filing away.

"Oh, there you are then," he grumbled. "I was just a-coming to see if you were finishing the bottle all to your own cheek. Here, give us hold."

He took a deep draught, and recommenced filing with renewed vigour for some minutes.

"Now," he said, "this is the last time of trying. If it won't do it we must do the other thing."

He tried the key, and it turned half-way, but it was forced upon them that there was something wanting. The key did not touch some portion of the ingeniously-made lock, and the young man thrust it in his pocket.

"Better have tried the hammering at first," he said.

"No, no! The noise," cried Roach.

"Bah! Who's going to take any notice of a bit of knocking?" said the young man, contemptuously. "The sound can't reach them there."

"But suppose a policeman heard it as he passed?"

"Well, he'd hear it and say to himself, 'They've got the workpeople in.'"

"But—"

"Oh, blow your butts, old man! Did the police come to see what was the matter when the men took out the kitchener and put in a new one?"

"No, but—"

"But you're in a stew. That's what's the matter. Give us hold. Thinnest wedge, and the hammer, and you hold the light. That piece of leather will stop the sound."

The butler sighed, but obeyed his companion, handing him a steel wedge with an edge as fine as the blade of a knife. Then he held the light close while his companion gently tapped it in between the door and frame.

Another followed, and another—quite a dozen, of increasing sizes, having been brought; and the leather-covered hammer deadened the sound greatly, while the crack grew larger, and it seemed pretty certain that the steel wedges would sooner or later force open the door.

"See this?" said the operator, triumphantly.

"Oh yes, I see, but I'm in a bath o' perspiration."

"With doing nothing but hold a candle!" said Arthur, with a chuckle, as he drove in another wedge as far as it would go and released two more thinner ones. "Now I'm going to have a moment's rest and a drink while you go and see how dear old Mrs Barron is. Whistle if you want help."

The butler went off, and the young man drank and examined the progress he had made, and he was still examining so as to find where he could drive in the next wedge with the most effect when the butler came back.

"She hasn't stirred," he said.

"She can't," said his companion, with a laugh, and he began tapping again vigorously, but at the end of half a dozen strokes, as his hammer was poised to deliver another, there was a dull clang, and the young fellow leaped back.

"Hear that?" he said in a whisper full of triumph.

"Yes, it was like the banging to of another iron door."

"Banging to of an iron grandmother!" cried Arthur, contemptuously; "it's the whole front splitting away, and another wedge in will fetch it right off."

"I hope so," said Roach, piteously. "Do you think it will take much longer?"

"I don't care if it takes two days," said the other, coolly. "Don't matter so long as we get the door open."

Roach sighed.

"There, hold the light, and don't do that. You are a cheerful mate, 'pon my sivvy. Here goes."

The speaker began again, keeping a sharp lookout, so as to spring back and not be crushed by the falling door; and to this end he made Roach stand in the entrance and direct the light from there, giving him plenty of room. But the door did not fall, and at the end of an hour the hammer was thrown down.

"It's no go."

"Do you give it up?" cried Roach, eagerly.

"No, I don't give it up, but I'm not going to work all the flesh off my bones when one stroke will do the work."

"What! The powder?"

"That's it, old chap. Go and see how the old woman is."

Roach sighed, and went away, to return shivering.

"She looks horrible," he whispered; "but you mustn't think of powder, my lad. You'll bring the people in from both

sides to see what's the matter."

"Won't make noise enough for that, and I sha'n't use enough," said Arthur, coolly. "Don't talk. That door's got to come open, and I wish I'd tried this plan at first."

"But it's too dangerous."

"No, it isn't. You keep quiet, and make that light shine well on the key-hole."

As he spoke the young man took a pound canister of fine gun-powder from the portmanteau pushing the latter afterwards outside into the passage. Then with a small funnel, also provided in the portmanteau, and fitted with a curved piece of pipe, to fill the interior of the lock with the fine black dust, which ran away down the funnel and pipe as easily as sand from one side to another of an hour-glass.

"This is the way," said Arthur, eagerly. "I shall get pretty well half a pound in."

It seemed quite probable, for the powder ran trickling on, every stoppage being overcome by a shake or a tap or two, till at last, no matter how the door was rapped, no more would go down.

"Doesn't matter; there's plenty," said the young man, quietly, thrusting in a piece of ready prepared slow match, which hung down the front of the door and half a yard over the floor, where the powder sprinkled about was carefully dusted away.

Then by means of a wedge some scraps of rag were driven in tightly to fill up the key-hole, and the young man rose up.

"There we are, old chap," he said. "All we've got to do is to open the lantern, touch the end of that slow match in the light, let it go down—stop a minute, let's blow away a little more of the powder—then there'll be plenty of time to shut and lock the door, wait for the blow-out of the lock, and go in after and pick up the best pieces, fill our Gladstones as we like and be off."

He went down on his knees, and, trembling violently, Roach held up the lantern, as he stood quiet outside now.

"Here! How am I to see?" cried his companion, angrily.

"But it isn't safe to bring a light near the powder."

"Bosh! How can a light behind glass do any harm? Come closer, I mustn't leave any powder near the slow match. That's better; I can see now, and—Ah! take care."

For all at once the butler fell over him with a crash, the lantern struck against the opposite wall and came open, the lamp portion falling out and firing some of the scattered powder, while at the same moment the lobby door was banged to, shut, and they heard the shooting of the lock.

Chapter Twenty Five.

The Collector Wakes Up.

Professor Westcott, next door, had another consignment that morning. The London and North Western Railway Company's men called with their van and a way-bill to deliver two chests from Birmingham, weighing over two hundredweight each, both strongly screwed up and roped, and a smaller line round them, carefully-sealed:—"Books; with great care. To be kept dry."

There were two men with the van, and a boy, the former making very light of the heavy chests as they lifted them off the tail-board of the vehicle, while the professor stood blinking on the steps in his big spectacles, his grey hair hanging down long from beneath a black velvet skull-cap, and his rusty dressing-gown, tied on anyhow, reaching nearly to his heels.

"Rum old owl, Joe," said one of the men. "This makes six chesties I've delivered since Christmas."

"Books?" said the other. "Yes, books. The old buffer's got his house chock-full of 'em from top to bottom, I should say. You'll see when we get in; he'll ask us to carry 'em downstairs."

"All right, mate; I don't mind if its anywheres near the beer cellar."

"Well, it ain't, Tom, and so I tell you. I've delivered boxes o' books to him for years now, and I never see a glass o' ale yet."

"Stingy old hunks! I say, we ain't 'bliged to carry 'em farther then the front door. That's delivering."

"Yes, that's delivering, mate, but you're allus in such a hurry. I was going to say you get no beer, but he'll be as civil as treacle, and stand rubbing his hands and telling yer to mind and not break the glass in the book-cases as you passes; and when you've done he twinkles at you through them Chinee-looking specs of his, and crooks his finger, and beckons you to follow him into the front room, as is full of books. Then he brings out a little glass and a bottle of the most heavenly old sperrets you ever tasted. Tlat! I can taste it yet. Talk about cordial—why, it's enough to make you say you'll never have a glass in a pub. again."

"Well, lay hold," said Tom, sharply; "look alive! Can't you see the gentleman's a-waiting?"

The head van-man chuckled, and together they lifted in chest Number 1, the professor smiling and looking deeply interested.

"On the mat, if you please," he said, "and when you have carried in the other, I should be very much obliged if you would take them both downstairs, where I can open them without making a mess."

"Suttunly, sir," said Tom, and they set down Number 1 and went after Number 2, upon which the boy sat, drumming the side with his heels.

"Right, Tommy?"

"Right you are, mate." And the men went on with their task muttering—

"Don't see how it would make a mess if they were opened in the front passage. Long time since there's been a broom there."

"See the spiders too?"

"No, but I saw the webs."

"But what does he do with all these books? He can't read 'em all."

"Collects 'em, I should say. Steady! Got it?"

"Right!" and the second chest was carried in. "One moment while I shut the door," said the professor, rubbing his hands; "then I'll show you the way. Now then, please; mind the book-cases as you pass. It is rather dark. Very heavy, I suppose?"

"Oh, tidy, sir. Nothing to signify. Books is heavy things."

"Yes, very heavy, my good man. That's right, through this door, and down these stone stairs. I'm afraid you find it very heavy."

"Oh, we're all right, sir. Used to it," grunted Tom. "We're always lifting things in or out; but we has a good rest between, sir, and rides about in the company's carriage."

"Down there, please, under that window, where I can see to unpack them. Thank you."

The two men went up the stone staircase again, noting the empty chests and book-cases with which the walls were lined, and above all the dust of years collected thickly. Then the second chest was carried down, and the quaint-looking old gentleman smiled and made his round-glassed spectacles twinkle as they reached the hall.

"I must sign the paper and pay you, my men," he said; and then in a drily comical way he crooked his right index finger, and beckoned to them to follow him into the gloomy book-lined dining-room, where he signed the delivery book, paid the carriage, and then took a bottle from a cellarette and a glass from a closet under a book-case, and poured out for the men, while they tossed off the rich spirit in turn.

"That's prime, sir," said the first man.

"'Eavenly," sighed Tom.

"Old and good, my men. I'm glad you like it. It's soft and mellow, and will not hurt you. Have another glass?"

"Hurt yer, sir!" said the second man, with a sigh; "that stuff wouldn't hurt a babby."

It did not hurt him when it came to his turn. To use his own figurative way of speaking, he only made one bite at it, and then glanced at the black bottle as if it were a little idol which ought to be worshipped, before following his leader out into the hall, the old professor closing the door after them and immediately after, drawing himself up straight, taking off his goggle glasses and thrusting them into his pocket, looking now a keen-eyed, elderly man, with the sharp, yellow-tinged face of a New Englander.

Going back with a firm step into the dining-room, and with the weak old stooping manner entirely wanting, he took a fresh glass from the closet, filled it and tossed off the contents.

"Hah! yes, that is a good glass of brandy," he muttered; and taking a cigar from the same receptacle he lit up and began to smoke, as he seated himself at a table, drew forward a blotter, and spent some time reading and writing letters, before throwing himself upon an old well-worn couch and going off into sleep which lasted a couple of hours.

He woke and in the most business-like way went downstairs into the basement, where from a cupboard he took a large screw-driver, walked to the chests, cut the ropes, and carefully examined the seals attached to the lesser cords before disturbing them. Then, apparently satisfied, he cut these in turn, and began to take out the screws from the lid of the first chest.

He had reached the last screw when he suddenly stopped short and stood listening. The next minute he had walked to the end of the passage, to stand listening again, till apparently satisfied, he went into a dark corner and pulled at a knob as if ringing a bell. Then he went sharply back to the chests, laid down the screw-driver, and hurried up the stairs to the dining-room with all the activity of a man of forty.

Here he went to a book-case and took down an ancient-looking massive tome, laid it upon the table, lifted the cover, and showed that it was only an imitation book, the cover proving to be the lid of a box in which lay a mahogany case, from which he drew out a small revolver, and after examining its six chambers to see if they were loaded, he carefully concealed it in the breast of the vest he wore beneath the old dressing-gown.

Then the spectacles were resumed, and the slow, stooping, aged aspect came over him, as he went into the hall, threw off his dressing-gown and took an old-fashioned coat from a peg, donned it, and then completed his old-world aspect with a quaint broad-brimmed hat.

He looked the most peaceable of elderly gentlemen as he took a baggy umbrella from the stand, went out, closed the door after him, walked slowly along by the area railings for a few steps, and then turned up the steps to the Clareboroughs' door, passing into the hall so quickly that it seemed as if the door was opened from the inside, though anyone who had watched would have seen that there was a very quick, clever application of a latch-key.

His movements now were slow, deliberate and silent. He laid down umbrella and hat upon a table, and, apparently quite at home, went from room to room on the ground floor before ascending to the drawing-rooms; but finding no one, he went a floor higher and then descended to the hall, where from the top of the stairs he stood listening to the hammering going on below.

For some time he seemed undecided how to act, but at last he was in the act of descending, when steps below made him retreat, and he stepped back, listening, and hearing Roach go into the pantry. The next minute the man began to ascend, and as actively as a cat, and with as silent a step, the professor ran to the foot of the grand staircase and bounded up to the drawing-room floor, ensconced himself behind a heavy curtain which draped one of the doors, and made out that whoever it was reached the hall and went into dining-room, library, study, lobby and morning-room, before he went back to the stairs and descended once more to the basement.

The professor was after him directly, and at the head of the stairs in time to hear Roach come out of the pantry again, and the chink of a glass against a bottle.

He descended the gloomy stairs by slow degrees, listening the while to the work going on, and hearing the sound of tools, the whisperings, and after a long period of waiting and another forced retreat when Roach went again to the pantry to make sure the housekeeper was safe, he finally stood thinking.

"Someone who knows the place well," he said to himself. "Quite at home. Where can the old woman be? They can't have killed her."

He raised one hand quickly to his breast, as the thought sent a thrill through him, and taking advantage of a busy time when tools clinked and voices whispering were heard, he stole right down, stepped cautiously along the passage, and then darted into the first open doorway, for there was an impatient utterance from somewhere ahead, and he felt that he was on the point of being discovered. But the work went on again, and he glanced round, found that he was in the butler's pantry, and saw at the same instant more—the tightly-bound woman upon the table.

He was at her side in an instant, and as he bent over her the wild eyes were opened and gazed intently in his.

There was no occasion for him to raise his finger to his lips, for the old housekeeper, as the tapping went on, gave him a meaning look and jerked her head side-wise, before lying perfectly still again.

The professor nodded sharply, tapped his breast, and then drew a pen-knife from his pocket, with whose keen blade he quickly divided the rope which bound hands and feet. Then, pressing his finger to his lips once more, he went silently out of the pantry, followed by the housekeeper's eyes, as breathing hard she watched him and then lay perfectly still with her face contracted by pain and dread, waiting for the dénouement.

It was long in coming, for the professor's movements were slow and cautious in the extreme. But there was to be no more retreat. He did not know who were there for some time, but he was ready to meet the enemy, whoever it might be.

At last he was in a position from which he could peer round the angle where the passage turned sharply, and as he gazed into the lobby a few yards off, where Roach directed the light of the bull's-eye lantern with quivering hand, his own trembled and the revolver he held shook when it was raised again and again to take aim.

At last a grim smile of satisfaction tightened his lips into a line, for he saw his opportunity.

In the very nick of time, after stealing close up, he threw himself forward, and with one heavy thrust drove the butler forward over his companion, banged to the door and locked it, bringing out the key, before he retreated and turned the corner to listen for the explosion which did not come.

"Light went out, I suppose," he muttered. "Pity too. Pleasanter for others, and it would have been accidental."

He thrust back the revolver, placed the key in his pocket, and without stopping hurried into the pantry.

"Got them—safe," he said, and ran upstairs to the handsome library, where he unlocked a cabinet, touched a button and waited for a minute, before a little weird voice answered—

"Who is it?"

He gave his number to the questioner, and asked to be switched on to X987654321.

In a few minutes, in obedience to the modern magic of the telephone, there came another signal and question and satisfactory proof of identity, before the professor said sharply—

"Kakatoa. Come quick."

"Hah!" sighed the operator, as he closed the little cabinet; "now for the old lady. Is the danger scotched or killed?"

He hurried down to the pantry, to find that the housekeeper had not moved; and as soon as he reached her side, he took her in his arms, while hers feebly clasped his neck.

"My poor old darling!" he whispered tenderly. "In much pain?"

"A good deal. My ankles are numbed. Is there any danger now?"

"Not for us, I think," he said grimly. "There, hold still, and I'll carry you up to the library;" and lifting her from the table as easily as if she had been a mere girl, he bore her up the stairs and laid her upon a couch, kneeling afterwards by

her side to chafe her ankles and wrists in turn, while she told him all that he did not know.

"What will you do now?" she said anxiously at last.

"Go on chafing my poor old darling's ankles," he said quietly.

"No, no; you know what I mean—those two men."

"Did anyone see them come, dear?"

"Not that I am aware of," she replied.

"Humph!"

"Well, you do not speak."

"Why should I? It is not your business—not entirely mine. We must see what they say."

"You have sent for them?"

"Of course; directly. It is a vital question."

"For us?"

"For them, I fear."

The old woman shuddered.

"Why that?" he said quietly. "Ought we to sympathise so much with burglars who stand at nothing?"

"But it is so horrible," she whispered.

"It would be as horrible for us," he said sharply; "and we are of more consequence than they."

"But surely they will not—"

"Kill them? Possibly. Something must be done to silence them. It is their own doing, the scoundrels! We cannot go to the wall."

The old woman closed her eyes and sighed.

"God help us!" she said softly. "Harry, I am getting very weary of my life now; it is so near the end."

"Hush!" said the professor, gently. "There are things which you ought not to see or know. You are weak from the shock and injuries you have received."

"But listen, dear."

"My dear old wifie," he said tenderly, "it is of no use to look in that imploring way at me. You know what Jem is, and I am too old now to set myself in antagonism with him. There, be at rest; I will do all I can. Don't think me so bloodthirsty as to desire their end. Still, so many interests are at stake. It is a case of burglar against housekeeper. The scoundrels came armed."

"Armed?"

"Yes, I saw a revolver in the trunk with their burgling tools. If I had come upon them suddenly, and they had had time, they would have fired at me."

"Oh, surely not!"

"Humph! You are a woman, my dear, with a woman's gentle heart, ready to defend and palliate. After the way in which I found you, I do not feel so merciful. Let me ask you one question; if there was nothing to fear from them, why did they come armed?"

The old housekeeper made no reply, but lay back upon the couch weak and trembling, while the professor slowly paced the room, till she opened her eyes wildly, and signed to him to come to her side.

"I am more upset than I thought for," she said feebly. "Help me up to my room; I think I can walk now."

The professor's brow lightened, for it was a relief to him to hear the old woman's words; but she noted the change and sighed as she rose painfully.

"You will wait until they come?" she said, trembling at the thought of that which she dreaded.

"Need you ask?" said the professor, gravely. "Come, you will be better after lying down for a few hours. Try to forget everything in the remembrance that I am doing all for you that I can."

"Yes, Harry," she said softly; "I have never had cause to complain of your want of love for me in these forty years; but for my sake, dear, let there be no more crime."

"For your sake I will do everything I can," said the professor, gravely, as he bent down and kissed her while leading

her to the door and then slowly up to a bedroom on the third floor, where he left her at the end of a few minutes, apparently sinking into a doze.

As he stole out softly he silently removed the key, replaced it on the other side, and locked her in, before descending quickly to the hall, where he stood listening for a few minutes, and then went down into the basement and stepped softly forward to listen at the outer door of the plate vault.

A faint muttering of voices could be heard as he placed his ear to the key-hole, but all else was still; there was no sound of an effort being made to escape, and he went back to the hall, where he took out and re-examined his revolver.

"I wonder," he said to himself, "whether a shot or two could be heard in the street. Pish! Absurd! No one heard the reports when poor Bob went down. Ah, here they are. They haven't been long."

For there was a faint rattle of a latch-key in the door, and Robert Clareborough entered, in company with the brothers, the former looking excited and anxious, the two latter stern and as if prepared for the worst.

Chapter Twenty Six.

Grim Death.

As the door banged to and was locked, Roach uttered a wild cry and threw himself upon the floor, covering the back of his head with his hands, as he thrust it into the corner farthest from where the powder was sputtering and sending up tiny clouds of smoke.

Arthur shrank away against the wall for a moment, glancing wildly at the broken lantern and the lamp-wick, burning still in a little pool of oil, while the powder kept flashing out, darting from grain to grain, where they had been scattered about the floor. Then the tiny flames divided, one set running towards the portmanteau, in which the partially-emptied tin had been thrown, the other going by fits and starts in the direction of the iron entry.

This nerved the younger man to desperation, and he made a dash at the grains upon the floor, to sweep them away before they reached the loaded door, feeling convinced, in his agony of fear, that the little burning train would somehow communicate with the powder with which he had charged the lock. But in spite of his efforts the fire was too quick, the flame running swiftly along by the bottom of the frame, and with a yell of despair he dashed to the other corner of the far side of the lobby, to imitate the butler, expecting to hear the charge explode, and then the iron door driven back to crush them to death.

It seemed long minutes to the two wretched men as they crouched there with their eyes shut, but it was only the matter of a few seconds' suspense before the little chamber was in total darkness, and filled with the dull, dank reek of the burnt powder.

At last the footman raised his head cautiously, with hope reviving. The charge had not gone off and the tin had not been reached.

He looked in the direction of the great safe, but all was black, and, rising slowly, he felt his way to the door to try if it were really fast; while as his hands glided over it he found that it fitted so closely that he could hardly make out the crack between door and frame. The main object of his search, though, was for the lock, in the hope that he should be able to force it off with one of the wedges, and then, armed as they were, he and his companion might escape.

But there was no lock to attack, no key-hole. That which he sought was of the mortice pattern, buried in the heavy lining, and wherever he passed his hands, the surface was perfectly smooth.

"Curse the old Jezebel!" he muttered. "Here, Roach, old man, rouse up. We're done, but we can't stay here—we must get out somehow. Did you see her? I wish I'd tied her up a little tighter."

"No, no, no," groaned Roach. "I did not see her. She must have got free somehow. I only felt her hands as she jumped upon me from behind and drove me forward on to you. Is—is the powder going off?"

"No! Get up. There isn't a spark now. Phew! it's enough to stifle a fellow. Where's that wine?"

"I put it somewhere in this corner. Yes, here."

"Give us hold. Be sharp."

There was a clicking noise in the utter darkness and after feeling about for a few moments, the younger man grasped the bottle, drank heavily, and passed it to his trembling companion, who snatched at it and drank deeply in turn.

"That's better," cried Arthur, sharply. "Now then, the matches."

"No, no, don't strike a light. Are you mad?"

"Pretty nigh, but we must risk it or we can never get out."

"We never shall get out alive," groaned Roach.

"Well, I mean to," said his companion; "so here goes. I can't use the hammer and chisels and wedges in this blessed darkness."

There was the crackle of a match, and the elder man uttered a cry of horror as he shrank into his corner again, but as the wax taper burned up steadily in Arthur's fingers, and no explosion followed, he obeyed his companion's order and picked up the lamp, which proved not to be utterly drained of oil, and after a little patient effort began to burn again as it was replaced in the broken lantern.

"Now, then, sharp's the word," said Arthur. "Hold the light while I chisel out the wood till I can get at the lock. Mustn't use the hammer, or it will put her on her guard. Wonder whether she's outside listening."

There was not a sound to be heard, and with Roach tremblingly holding the light, Arthur worked away with the sharpest-edged wedge, but made little progress, for a few cuts were sufficient to prove that the door was of the hardest oak, and when the man had been carving away for nearly an hour, with the perspiration streaming down his face, it was to throw down the chisel in despair, for the wood proved to be only the casing of an iron door of great strength.

"Give me the bottle," said Arthur, panting. "Can't you do something beside shivering there?"

Roach groaned as he handed the bottle.

"Man wants a bit o' Dutch courage over a job like this."

"We shall never get out," groaned Roach.

"Not if it's left to you, old man. You'd turn it into a tomb at once. Here, I've left you a drop. Tip it off, and see if it'll put some pluck into you. There, I've tried fair play and quiet; now it's got to be foul play and noise. Give me hold of the hammer and let's see what a wedge'll do."

"Hist! What's that?"

Arthur needed no telling to be silent. Snatching the light from his companion, he reached over to the portmanteau and took out the two small revolvers, handed one to his companion, and whispered to him—

"It was the lock. Someone coming. Don't fire without you're obliged. I'll try the hammer first."

As he spoke he blew out the little lamp, and set it down, before standing facing the door with his hand raised, ready to strike down the first who entered.

Some minutes must have elapsed without further alarm, and the two men were ready to believe that the sharp snap they had heard must have come from the iron door of the closet, the frame springing back after being strained by the application of the wedges that had been driven in.

All at once, just as an attack was about to be made once more upon the way by which they had entered, and Arthur had taken a fresh match from his box, a soft light began to dawn, grew rapidly, and dazzled their eyes, as they strove to make out whence it came, and stood ready once more to strike.

It was not from the passage door, but from the ceiling just over the great safe, and as the men stood trembling with fear and excitement, there was a spurt of smoke from the great iron safe, a dull concussion, and the footman fell back. While as the butler stood staring upward, his face ashy grey in the soft light, as the smoke curled about a glowing bulk, there was a second spurt of smoke, and concussion, the wretched man fell forward across his companion, and the light grew dimmer in the heavy clinging vapour, slowly dying out into utter darkness, while the silence was as that of the tomb.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Under the Beeches.

It was a lovely morning in the sylvan solitude by The Towers, and leaving Mrs James and Mrs Dennis Clareborough in the drawing-room, Marion took her sunshade and a book, to wander away across the lawn to the gate in the ring fence, and then along the path at the edge of the beech wood, ostensibly to find a seat in the shade of one of the great spreading trees, and have a calm, quiet read.

But ere she had gone a couple of hundred yards the fever in her blood and the throbbing of her temples told her that the idea of calm and rest was the merest farce.

She had hailed the departure of the gentlemen for Paris, as they had said, as a relief from the quiet, insidious siege laid to her by James Clareborough, who rarely spoke but on the most commonplace topics, and was always coldly polite; but there were moments when she met his eyes and read plainly enough that his intentions were unaltered, and that sooner or later he would again begin to make protestations of his love.

Her position seemed harder than she could bear. His wife hated her with a bitter, jealous hatred, but she was too much crushed down and afraid of her fierce lord to show her dislike more openly, though there were times when she seemed ready to break out into open reproach.

"Oh, if I could only end it all!" thought Marion again and again. "Will Rob never break with them?"

"Never," she said to herself, despairingly; "they would never let him go. And yet surely the world is wide enough, and somewhere surely he might find peace."

"No, he would never settle down to another life. It is fate. There is neither peace nor happiness now for me."

She had wandered on for quite a mile before, feeling hot and wearied, she seated herself on one of the great gnarled mossy buttresses of a beech and leaned her head upon her hand, thinking of him whom she could not keep out of her thoughts, but still in despair. Then her thoughts turned once more to James Clareborough, and, brave and firm as she was, a thrill of horror ran through her at the dread which oppressed her and set her heart throbbing wildly.

What if this Parisian journey was only a ruse and James Clareborough were back on purpose to try and gain a meeting with her while her brother was not by her side?

The thought was horrible, and it grew more intense, her cheeks flushing and then growing ghastly white from her emotion.

"What madness to come out here alone!" she thought. "He would have been watching for me, and be ready to read it as an invitation."

She looked round wildly, and started as a sharp tap was heard close at hand.

"Am I growing such a nervous, feeble coward," she said, "that I am afraid of a rabbit? What have I to fear from him?"

She laughed at her weak folly, and to prove to herself that she was no longer under the influence of dread she took her book and opened it at random, but did not read a word, for her musings began again.

"It is excusable," she thought. "All these years of dread of discovery, of some end coming to their plans, and for the sake of what? A miserable gilded life of luxury that is hateful to me and makes me shiver when I look into his pleading eyes. He loves me and would marry me to-morrow in his ignorance; and then what would he say when he knew the truth? I cannot bear it; there must—there shall be an end. It is not life; it is one miserable nightmare of fear."

She sprang to her feet, uttering a faint cry of horror, and turned to run. For there was some truth in her suspicions; she had been followed. There was a quick step behind, and she had run some little distance before, glancing back, she saw that it was not James Clareborough, but Chester, standing beneath the trees which had sheltered her, and now gazing after her with a look of anger and despair.

She stopped, and he came up to her side.

"Have I grown so hateful to your sight?" he said bitterly.

"No, no!" she cried, holding out her trembling hand, which he seized and pressed passionately to his lips. "I thought it was James Clareborough."

"Then he has dared to insult you again?" said Chester, angrily.

"No, no; indeed, no," she cried.

"But you live in fear of him. Oh, Marion, Marion, how long is this weary life to last? Once more let me plead. Would not a quiet life with my devotion be a happier one than this miserable luxury, where you are constantly persecuted by a scoundrel?"

"Oh, hush, hush!" she murmured. "I have told you it can never be."

"Yes, but these are words. Your woman's honour forbids you to stay."

"Hush, for pity's sake! You torture me," she cried. "Must I explain, but you must see and know that I am tied down to it, that I cannot leave my brother—that he would never let me go."

"I cannot—I will not believe but that all this is imaginary," said Chester, firmly. "Will you not trust me? Will you not tell me what it all means, and let me, a man, be the judge?"

"No," she said, mastering her emotion and speaking calmly now. "Once more, I cannot, I will not explain. Why have you come down here?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You know," he said. "Where should I be but near the woman who is my very life?"

"But it is madness—it is misery and torture to me."

"Poor wretch that I am," he said bitterly. "Still, I cannot help it."

"But," she cried imploringly, "your life would not be safe if they knew of your being here."

"Indeed? Well, what of it? My presence is a torture to you. I am a torture and misery to myself. They would not dare to kill me. I don't know, though," he said, with a mocking laugh, "by accident, perhaps."

"Dr Chester," cried Marion, appealingly, "does it please you to inflict this agony upon me?"

"No, no," he said, snatching at her hand. "I would give my life to save you pain."

"Then go. Leave me and forget me. I am not the true, innocent woman you think. I am not fit to be your wife."

"What!" he cried, turning ghastly pale, while as she saw his agony her face grew convulsed and she half raised her hands to him pleadingly, but let them fall.

He saw the movement and snatched them to his breast.

"It is not true," he cried proudly. "Some false sentiment makes you say this. I will not believe it of the woman I love."

She did not resist until he tried to take her to his heart. Then she shrank away.

"No," she said. "You must not touch me like that. Once more, believe me, all this must end. You must think of me no more—you must go at once, and we must never meet again."

"You have told me that before," he said, "but I am not a free agent. I was obliged to come. I have been here these three days past, watching for an opportunity to speak to you; and when I do you once more cast me off—you drive me away. Well, I have borne it so long; I can go on bearing it till you relent, or—I die," he added softly.

She looked at him wildly for a moment, and his hopes rose, for the relenting seemed close at hand, but she was stern and cold again directly.

"And your betrothed wife," she said. "What of her?"

He was silent for a few moments, and then he made a deprecating sign with his hands.

"What do you know of her?" he said.

"Everything," she replied. "How basely and cruelly you have behaved to her. Is this your honour as a man?"

He heard a deep sigh.

"I have only one thing to say in my defence," he said slowly. "I believed that I loved her; but then I had not seen you. I was not under this spell."

"It is no spell," she said firmly. "Go to her, and forget me. I tell you that I am not worthy to be your wife, and that such a union is impossible for reasons which I dare not explain. You hear me?"

"Yes," he said sadly, "I hear you."

"Then good-bye for ever."

She turned from him, but a piteous moan escaped her lips, and the next moment he had clasped her to his heart.

"Marion, my own!" he whispered, as he pressed his lips to hers; "then you do love me!"

"Yes," she said, as she clung to him, and for a moment or two returned his embrace. "You know I love you and shall never love another, but go now, for Heaven's sake! I tell you it is impossible. Good-bye—good-bye."

She tore herself from his grasp and fled through the wood, not daring to turn her head to see if he followed, lest in her woman's weakness she should give way and dare everything for his sake.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Caught Once More.

Marion did not check her pace till, hot and breathless, she was forced to rest for a few minutes. Her brain was in a state of bewildering confusion, and had Chester been there then to plead his cause, her heart would have made but a poor defence. She would have been his, and his alone.

But in a few minutes she began to grow calmer; the dangers of such a course were more and more apparent, and at last, as she walked on towards The Towers, her thoughts of the future assumed their wonted current, and she began to plan.

She was not long in deciding what to do. Chester was evidently staying somewhere near at hand; he would grow more and more persistent, and she could see nothing in the future but his presence being discovered by James Clareborough or his brother, and then some terrible mischief would arise, and fresh misery ensue.

There seemed to be but one course open, and that was to escape from Chester's pursuit and to this end she went quietly into her own room to try and grow more composed, joined the others at lunch, and then in the most quiet, matter-of-fact way ordered the pony carriage to be round directly after for a drive.

"You will not go with me, I suppose, Di?" she said to James's wife.

"I? No, thank you, Marion. I am not well to-day," said the lady, flushing.

"Will you come, Hester?" she continued.

"I can't; I am going over to the Ellistons' to tennis," was the reply.

"Then I'll have my little drive alone," said Marion, smiling; and shortly afterwards she stepped into the phaeton, the boy groom sprang up behind, and the spirited little ponies started off along the park drive at a rapid pace.

"How nice Marion always looks," said Mrs Dennis, "and how well she drives."

"Yes," said her sister-in-law, bitterly; "everyone admires her. It is always Marion, Marion! Why did he not marry her? He would if I died. How long does it take, Hester, to break a woman's heart?"

"Oh, hush, hush, dear!" whispered her sister-in-law, soothingly. "I know how sad it is, but you ought not to be so cold to poor Marion. I honestly believe that she absolutely hates James."

"Hates? when she does all that she can to lure him on?"

"That is not true, dear," said Mrs Dennis, gravely. "I know Marion better than you do, because you have always shut your heart against her."

"Well, can you wonder?"

"Yes and no. It is a terrible position, and I pity you, dear; but believe me, James's advances fill Marion with disgust and shame, and some day you will find this out."

"I'd give the world to believe it," sobbed the wretched woman, "but I cannot, and I am certain that she has gone to keep some appointment with him now."

"You are unjust, Di dear," said Mrs Dennis, kissing her lovingly.

"I am a miserable, unhappy woman, ill-treated and scorned by the man who swore to love me. What else can you expect? Why did I ever enter this wretched family?"

"Dazzled as I was by the wealth and show, I suppose," said Mrs Dennis, coldly. "But we are their wives, and must bear our lot."

"It is easy for you, Hester," said Mrs James, clinging to her sister-in-law now. "Paddy is always manly and kind. He is never like James."

"No," said the lady addressed. "I could not—No, no, don't let's talk about that. There, there, dear; believe me, it would be best to try and wean him from her. Some day there may be a great change. I believe that sooner or later Rob and Marion will break away."

"Or James and Marion," said her sister-in-law, bitterly.

"No, no. Try and be just, dear, and do all you can to win Jem from his wretched madness. We want no more terrible quarrels. Next time someone else might suffer from a pistol shot, and then—"

"You mean James," cried his wife, with a spasmodic movement of her hand to her breast.

"Yes," said Mrs Dennis, "I mean James. Rob would certainly resent it fiercely."

The unhappy wife turned pale, and shivered as she walked away. Meanwhile, in accordance with her plans, Marion drove by a cross road to the pleasant little Kentish town half a dozen miles away, pulled up at the station, and on alighting handed the reins to the young groom, told him to wait for an hour, and if she were not back by the next train to drive home.

Then entering the station she took a ticket for London, too deeply intent upon her own thoughts to notice who followed her into the office; and as soon as the train drew up, she stepped into an empty compartment and drew up the glasses, to go on thinking out her further proceedings, for her mind was now made up.

She had ample means, her brother having well provided her with a banking account of her own, and her intention was to go straight to the town house, pack up a couple of trunks, and take the night boat for Dieppe, and thence go on to Switzerland, where she could extend her projects, though where she went mattered little so long as she could avoid another meeting with her pursuer.

The train was gathering speed for its straight run on to the terminus, and she was congratulating herself upon her decision, and then thinking that there was only one difficulty in her way—the opposition which might arise on the part of the old housekeeper. But she concluded that a little firmness would suffice; if not, a frank avowal of the dangers she foresaw would win the old woman to her side, and then, once free from the trammels which surrounded her, she would perhaps regain her peace of mind, so broken since that terrible night when she fetched Chester to her brother.

"And he will soon forget me and return to her who is his by right, and then—"

She uttered a wild cry of alarm and shrank back for a moment or two in the corner of the compartment, for, in spite of the great speed at which they were going, the carriage window on her left was suddenly darkened, the door thrown open, and a man climbed in, fastening the door again, and then sinking panting upon the opposite seat.

"You here?" she cried wildly. "Oh! what madness!"

"Yes, hardly the work of a sane man, with a train going at express speed."

"You might have been killed!" cried Marion, trying hard to be firm, and descending to commonplaces.

"Yes, it seemed very likely once, for the carriages were a good way apart; but if I had been, what then? Not the first man who has died for a woman's sake."

"Why have you come?" she said hurriedly.

"Why have I come?" he replied contemptuously. "You ask that! Well, let me tell you; because I knew that sooner or later you would try to elude me; and I have watched night and day to prevent that. Correct me if I am wrong; my heart tells me that you are going up to town to avoid me, and are then going further to be where I cannot find you. Am I correct?"

"Yes, quite," she replied gravely. "I did not know that I was so weak. I know it now, and, as I have told you, we must never meet again."

"I will not argue with you," he said, "only tell you once more that you take a woman's view of imaginary danger. I take that of a man determined to sacrifice life sooner than lose sight of you again—a poor stake, perhaps, for without you it is a worthless thing, but it is all I have."

She sighed and he saw that her face grew harder, as she avoided his gaze and sat looking out of the window in silence.

"Do I understand you," she said at last, "that you mean to follow me?"

"To the world's end," he cried.

"Is his manly, to force yourself upon a helpless woman?"

"No; it is despicable perhaps, but I am lost now to reason. You are everything to me; to be near you is to live—to lose sight of you is to die. You are my fate, and you draw me to your side."

"To your ruin, perhaps to your death," she said wildly. "You must have grasped what kind of men my relatives are. You must have seen what risk you run."

"Yes, I have seen and thought out all this, but it is as nothing to your love."

"And would you see me suffer through your folly and imprudence?"

"I would give anything to spare you suffering."

"Then leave me before my agony becomes too great to bear."

"I—can—not!" he cried. "Drive me from you, and when I find that all hope is gone, then I will seek for rest."

"What!" she cried.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I am no boasting boy," he said sadly. "Everything to make life worth living will be gone, and an easy painless death beckoning me on. I am a doctor, I have but to go home, and there it is, to my hand."

She said nothing, but sank back in the corner of the carriage, covering her face with her hands; and he saw that her breast was heaving with the painful sobs struggling for exit.

He bent over towards her, and touched her arm.

"Marion," he whispered.

She started from him as if she had been stung, and her eyes flashed as her hands fell into her lap.

"Don't touch me!" she said wildly. "You are mad."

The train sped on rapidly, taking them nearer and nearer to their fate, as both sat back in silence now—she trembling, battling with her heart in her struggle to devise some means of escaping him, he sinking into a dull, stolid state of determination, for, come what might, he was resolved never to leave her now.

At last the train slowed up to the station where the tickets were taken, and Marion handed hers.

"I have no ticket," said Chester, quietly, handing the man a sovereign. "I had not time to go to the booking-office. I got in at Bineleigh. This lady will bear me out."

The man quickly wrote a receipt and handed it with the change. Then the train glided on once more, and in a few minutes they were in the great terminus.

"You have no carriage waiting?" Chester asked.

"No," she said quietly; "I'll take a cab."

Chester summoned one, and handed her in.

"Where do you wish to be driven?" he said.

"Home."

"May I come with you, or must I follow in another cab?" he asked.

"I am at your mercy, Dr Chester," she replied sadly.

He hesitated for a moment, then told the driver the name and number of the street, and sprang in.

Marion drew a deep catching breath as he took his seat by her side, and then remained silent till they reached the familiar doorway. Here, in the most matter-of-fact way, Chester alighted and handed out his companion and they walked up to the door together, Chester reaching out to pull the bell.

"No," she said, speaking in a quick, startled tone of voice, and he looked at her wonderingly, for she opened the door with a latch-key, stepped in, holding the door with one hand and extending the other.

"Now," she said firmly, "good-bye."

For answer he stepped forward with a smile, but not to take her hand. He pressed the door gently, but with sufficient force to make her give way, and his foot was on the step.

"No, no, for pity's sake!" she almost moaned; "it may mean your death."

"Well, better that than an empty life," he cried, as she slowly gave way, mastered by the force that held her in its strange power. The next minute the door was closed, and they stood together in the great, dim hall.

He saw that she was struggling to be firm, but a wave of triumphant joy carried him on, for he knew that he had won.

"My own!" he whispered passionately; "at last! at last!" and he clasped her in his arms.

"No, no!" she cried, making one last effort for the supremacy; and, thrusting him violently away, she turned and fled towards the end of the hall, darted through the open doorway into the great darkened dining-room and tried to shut the door.

But he was too close, and this time he caught her in his arms, raised her from the carpet, to bear her to the couch that had borne her wounded brother for so long, and there, letting her sink down, dropped upon his knees at her feet.

The room was very dim, the electric light being only slightly raised, but he could see her half-closed eyes and trembling lips, as she bent over towards him now till her brow rested upon his shoulder.

"This is not death, but life," he whispered passionately. "Tell me, you were going to escape from me?"

"Yes."

"Where were you going?"

"Abroad—Switzerland."

"When?"

"To-night."

"Yes, to-night," he said softly, "and I with you, dearest. Your slave—yourself—one with you always. Marion, we must never part again."

"Never part again," she whispered back, as his lips sought hers. "You have mastered. I can resist no more; take me, dearest—I am yours. But we must go at once. At any moment they may return."

"Who may? Your brother and James Clareborough?"

"Yes. Come away."

"To the world's end with you," he whispered, but she uttered a cry and sprang to her feet.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Didn't you hear? Come."

She led the way quickly into the hall, and the voices her preternaturally sharpened hearing had detected came from below.

Marion caught Chester's hand and ran with him towards the great front door, which they had almost reached, when there was a sharp, quick rattling sound before them and the dull movement of feet upon the stone step.

The next moment the door was opening towards them.

Hemmed in, with peril on either hand.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Light in Darkness.

As Chester turned to face what he knew must prove to be a desperate encounter, Marion snatched at his wrist.

"Quick!" she whispered, and hurried with him through a door on their right, which led into a library with two windows facing the street; but the shutters were closed and the place was dimly lit by four diamond-shaped holes cut in their top panels, each of which sent a broad white ray across the room, to strike upon the end nearest the door, and to avoid their light Marion led him quickly close up into one corner by the window curtain.

They had hardly taken refuge there, to stand close together, when a hand struck the panel a sharp pat, and gave the door, which had gently swung to, a thrust which sent it back against the stop.

"Come in here," said James Clareborough in a low, surly voice; and Chester felt his companion shiver, and the blood surged to his brain as he dimly saw the shadowy figures of four men enter the room, three of whom took chairs and threw themselves into them, the other standing against a book-case with a dull patch of light from the window shutters striking full upon his breast, about which his hand kept on playing nervously.

It seemed to Chester that it was only a matter of moments before they would be seen; but so far the party were unconscious of their presence, and a couple of dull red spots of light waxed and waned as the aromatic fumes of cigar smoke began to pervade the room.

"Throw open one of the shutters, uncle," cried James Clareborough, hoarsely.

"No, no," half shouted a voice which Chester recognised at once as that of his old patient.

"What! Why?" cried James Clareborough, and the violent throbbing of Chester's heart grew less painful as he heard Robert Clareborough's reply—

"Because if ever men wanted the darkness it is now."

It was a respite, for no one uttered a word for a few moments. Then in a low, angry voice, James Clareborough spoke again, and, with his every nerve on the strain, Chester noted that he took his glowing cigar from his lips and held it down between his knees.

"Curse them! Who would ever have thought of the fools attempting that?"

"Where's your wife, uncle?" said a voice which made the hand with which Marion clung to Chester's wrist give a slight twitch.

"Upstairs, lying down, my boy," said another voice, and it was Chester's turn to start as he recognised it as one he had heard before, though he could not make out where.

"Is she much hurt?" said Robert Clareborough.

"More frightened than hurt," said the same voice. "Of course it is a terrible shock."

"Horrible! Here, this must be the end of it. What do you say, Paddy?"

"Confound it! yes. I'm sick."

"Will you stop this cursed preaching, Rob?" snarled James Clareborough. "You fools! You know there can be no end to it. What are you talking about? It was their own fault."

"Ah!" ejaculated Rob in a tone which made his sister shiver.

"Look here," continued James Clareborough; "are you two going to show the white feather? Take the case fairly, Paddy. Suppose this had been at The Towers in the night, and we came upon a couple of scoundrels—with revolvers, mind!—carrying off the girls' jewellery, would either of you have hesitated about firing?"

"I suppose not," said Dennis, heavily, "but it seemed such cold-blooded work."

"Been more cold-blooded if they had dropped us two. Now, then, no nonsense; let's look the matter straight in the face. One thing is enough at a time. We can discuss Rob's ideas of a dissolution of partnership later on," was added, with a sneer. "Now, uncle; what about their coming? We had better have the old lady down."

"No, let her be; she can tell you no more than I can. They must have asked for leave to come up as you were all away, and come straight here ready to pitch some tale, and your aunt unsuspectingly let them in. They must have set upon her, tied her fast, and carried her down."

"Must, must, must!" cried James Clareborough, impatiently. "You were not here."

"No, boy, but it tells its own tale. Arthur was dressed as if for a holiday, and the other fool too."

"But what did it mean?" said Rob, hoarsely; "suspicion—an effort to find out—or robbery?"

"Robbery, my boy, for certain. They thought that they would get at the girls' jewellery."

"Yes, that's it," said James Clareborough, sharply; "an interrupted burglary. Curse them! They had all the professional tools. Well, they won't want them any more."

Marion started, and Chester passed his arm round her as he felt her trembling violently. For something like light was beginning to dawn upon her—a light which grew clearer as the thought of the butler asking leave for him and the footman to have a day in town, to see to some business, as the gentlemen were away. That morning at breakfast, and now—

The light was growing hard, clear and ghastly.

"Now, then," said James Clareborough, sharply, "let's look the position in the face. Everything turns upon whether anyone knows beside ourselves that the hounds came here."

"Yes, everything," assented the voice which puzzled Chester still. "Would anyone know?"

"Is it likely?" said James, cynically. "They were coming on a burglarious expedition; they began by half killing the poor old aunt, and they were trapped trying to blow open the iron door. Is it probable that they would tell anyone they were coming here?"

"No; absurd," said Dennis, shortly.

"But still—"

"Will you hold your tongue, Rob?" cried his cousin. "Do you think they would have spoken?"

"No."

"Then we're safe in that direction," continued James Clareborough. "The next question is, then, did anyone who knew them see them come to the house? The odds are a million to one that no one did, for they would take pretty good care that their faces were not seen as they stood waiting. Besides, where does the inquiry begin? Down yonder. We were away; they ask for a holiday of my wife; she gives them leave; and they come away and do not return. Their relatives, if the poor devils have any, may make inquiry, but it is doubtful. I daresay we shall find that the scoundrels have been plundering us, and at the worst we could prove this. There it is in a nut-shell. They have disappeared like hundreds more, and the world will never be any wiser."

A chill of horror ran through Chester as he listened to all this, and he was conscious that his companion hung more heavily upon his arm, as if about to faint.

The pale, ghastly light was growing broader and clearer now, and as he grasped the fact that he was being made the recipient of the acknowledgment of a terrible deed, he felt strongly, knowing as he did the character of one of the men present, how perilous his position was growing. A few minutes more, he had strung himself up for a sharp encounter with the relatives who had, as it were, surprised them in a secret meeting. There would, he felt, be angry words, there might be blows, but the Clareboroughs would not dare to proceed farther. Now matters had assumed a dangerous shape, and his thoughts went towards the fireplace as he felt that the necessity might arise for him to defend himself and his companion—one against four.

His heart beat fast, but mingled with the feelings of alarm which would assail the stoutest in such a position, he felt thrill after thrill of delight. For Marion clung more tightly to him, as if trusting to his protection, and he mentally swore that he would protect her, come what might.

His thoughts came fast, but he had little time for musing; and as his arm tightened round his companion he listened eagerly for the next utterances of those who were grouped together some twenty feet away.

"Well," said James Clareborough, after a pause, "what have you all to say to that?"

Chapter Thirty.

Love is Master.

There was another pause, as if each of the other three waited for his companions to begin.

"James has spoken very well," said the owner of the hands which Chester could see playing about his breast; and as he uttered these words he too sank into a chair, and the ray of light struck across his face for a brief space, one, though, sufficiently long for Chester to recognise the features of the quaint old bookworm upon whom he had called during his search for the house which had been the scene of such strange adventures.

"Uncle!" he thought to himself, as the old man went on—

"It seems to me that we have nothing to fear. It is our own secret. What do you say, Dennis, my dear boy?"

"It looks all right, curse it!" said the young man, slowly. "I can't see how anyone can find it out. All we have to do is to go on as we have before—take care that everything is kept dark. What do you think, Rob, old man?"

"Think?" cried the latter, sharply; and as he spoke Chester felt a quiver of excitement run through her whom he clasped. "I think it is impossible to keep such a thing as this is quiet. Say what you like—that it was in your own defence you fired, there are the men's pistols to prove it lying with their burgling tools; say that they were surprised in the act—the marks on the iron door and their false keys will speak for that—but we can't go on with it in the way you propose; the police must be called in."

"You cursed fool!" snarled James Clareborough. "Bah! you always were an idiot and a hindrance to our enterprise. You could spend your share readily enough, but you were always like a log to drag at our heels."

"My dear boy!" cried the old professor, quickly, "hush, please; there must be no quarrelling now; we have too much at stake."

"Yes, hang it all, Jem! do keep that vitriol tongue of yours quiet," cried Dennis.

"Who is to keep quiet when he listens to such idiotic drivel? Bring the police in—set their detectives to examine the iron safe that they were trying to force—to look at the jewels and plate stored up inside. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" he laughed discordantly. "Has Rob any brains at all?"

"Yes, yes; he spoke without thinking," said the old man, eagerly. "Rob, my dear lad, you see it is impossible."

"Yes, Rob, old man, don't you see?" growled Dennis. "You can't say to the hounds of the law, 'You must stop your scent here.' Why, it would, as they say, be blowing the whole gaff."

"Well, let it," cried Robert, bitterly; "let them find it out. I'm sick of it all, and have been for years."

"Then you must get well again," said James Clareborough, fiercely.

"Yes, yes, he is upset," said the old man, quickly. "Robert's never been himself since you fired at him, Jem. It was a mad act on your part; but there, there! don't let's open old sores. Let me speak. Rob, my dear boy, this is not a position in which a man can study self. We are all linked together in this business, and the one who talks of throwing it up talks of throwing his partners over. Think, my lad, of what it means. You cannot draw back. It is impossible. This is a most unhappy business, but the poor wretches brought their fate upon themselves. They have fallen in our battle of life, and there is that something to be done for all our sakes—our wives' and your sister's sake. They must not know of this."

"That's right, uncle; that's right," growled Dennis. "Come, Rob, old man, you must feel that this is good sound

sense.”

“Yes,” said Rob, with a groan; “I suppose it is. There, uncle, go on.”

“Yes, yes, my dear boy,” cried the old man. “Well, here is our position, to finish up what Jem has said. It would be easier and better for us if we could call in the police and go through the inquest, but you know it is impossible. Now then, has either of you anything to propose over what must be done at once?”

There was utter silence, and Chester, as he stood there with a cold perspiration making his hair cling to his temples, wondered that those present did not detect the beating of his and his companion’s hearts.

“No one speaks,” said the old man, quietly; “well then, the old inventor has to come to the front again, as he always has since we held the first meeting, and had to look starvation in the face. Hark ye here, boys,” he continued in a low, deep whisper; “I have turned it all over in my mind, and there is only one thing to be done. I am not going to be troubled about the disposal of what is, after all—speaking as a chemist—so much matter which has to be resolved rapidly into its primary constituents. There is the far cellar beneath the other house; we must dig there. Then a few bags of cement, and a carboy of acid, etcetera, and the matter is at an end.”

Dennis drew a deep breath, and a low, hissing sound arose, which Chester felt must have come from between Robert Clareborough’s teeth.

“Well, have I spoken rightly?” said the old man.

“Yes, that’s right,” said James Clareborough.

“You others are silent, but of course you acquiesce. You must keep the women down at The Towers, or take them to the Riviera for a month, and your aunt will know nothing more. There, the administrative has spoken; it is for the executive to go to work.”

“The executive has done its work,” said James Clareborough, sharply, “while you two stood behind a door and listened.”

Chester felt a spasm run through Marion as these words were spoken.

“Well, well,” said the old man; “you two are young and strong, and have steady hands. I do not wish to hang back from anything for ensuring the safety and prosperity of all. Robert, my boy, my muscles are not what they were; I shall be obliged to ask you to help me.”

Another spasm ran through Marion, and Chester, as they stood there in the darkness, felt her crane forward as if to hear her brother’s answer.

It came on the instant, in sharp, fierce tones,—“No, uncle. I wash my hands of it all. I cannot help what has passed, and I will be silent for the benefit of all, but help further in this—no, I would sooner die!”

“What!” cried James Clareborough, savagely. “Curse you, then, die, and rid us of our miserable clog. Look here, all of you—I will not stand by and let him sneak out of the business in this cursed cowardly way. You, Rob—you have got to help the old man over this, or—”

“Or what?” cried Rob, as fiercely. Marion made a movement as if to rush to her brother’s help, but Chester tightened his grasp.

“My dear Jem! My dear Rob! for Heaven’s sake!” cried the professor, interposing.

“You hold your tongue, old man,” cried James Clareborough, springing up; “I’ve had enough of this. For a year past now I’ve had to put up with his cursed objections, and hanging back from nearly everything, like the coward he is, and I’ll have no more of it. Paddy and I have done our bit of work to save the family from utter ruin and destruction, and now he is asked to help you in necessary work he begins to ride the high horse and dictate. I say he shall help you, and at once, or, if I hang for it, I’ll make him.”

“You make me, you cowardly, treacherous beast!” cried Robert, fiercely. “I defy you to. You two know that our quarrel has not been on account of my shrinking from the work. I always hated it, but I have still done my part. Why did he fire at me that night but because I struck him down for his cowardly, brutal insults to my poor sister, whose honour ought to have been sacred and the object of his defence?”

“You miserable hound!” growled James Clareborough. “Go with the old man at once, or you sha’n’t live another day!”

“Go yourself, beast, and keep your hand from that pistol, or I’ll fire, I swear!”

The utter silence in the room after these words were spoken was broken by the sharp clicking of two pistols, and half stunned for the moment, as he listened for the reports, Chester, recalling what must have happened on the night when he was first called in, threw himself before Marion to screen her from any bullet which might come there.

The act necessitated the loosening of his grasp, and with a wild cry Marion sprang from him, to rush in the direction of her brother’s voice.

“The door!” shouted the professor, and it was banged to and bolted by Dennis, as the old man sprang to his side, touched the stud, and the room was suffused with the soft electric light, showing the two adversaries, not a couple of yards apart, and Marion clinging to her brother’s arm, Chester just behind.

James Clareborough burst into a yell of mocking laughter.

“Picture—tableau—curtain!” he roared. “End of Act the Second, gentlemen. Loud cries for author and heroine. A success—a success! Marion, my charming, sweet, chaste, innocent cousin, I congratulate you. Beautifully done. Doctor, I

salute you. Brave, honourable, noble, frank, winner of the heroine's love—what a happy combination of gallantry and business! I presume that, vulture-like, you scented carrion, and came for another job; but sweet, innocent Marion here was premature. Marion, beloved one; caught here in the dark! Oh, fie!"

"Curse you! hold your mocking tongue!" cried Robert, fiercely. "You, Chester, how came you here?"

"Ha-ha-ha!" cried James Clareborough, "what a question! Our sweet Marion."

"Hound! Speak of my sister in that way again, and I'll fire."

"Bah!" retorted his cousin, contemptuously, and, without heeding him, he turned to Chester, covered him with his pistol, and in a low, fierce growl bade him sit down in the nearest chair.

Chester did not stir.

"Once more, you meddling idiot, sit down!" cried James Clareborough, menacingly, and Marion sprang from her brother's side to stand between them.

"Very well, I can wait. Now, all of you, our plans are known. Like a set of idiots, we have sat smoking and babbling before this fool, who could not be content with his last visit, but must intrude again, play the spy, and suffer for his knowledge. Uncle—Dennis, my lad, you agree with me?"

No one spoke, but the three others stood gazing fiercely at the interloper.

"Now, Rob," continued James Clareborough, "our quarrels can keep. Act the man. You see how we stand—you know what is at stake for all. Dr Chester, you are our prisoner again. Now—quick!"

Pistol in hand, he took a step forward, the others following his example, and Chester sprang towards the fireplace to seize the poker, while Marion tried to throw herself between him and his enemies.

The efforts of both were in vain. The professor balked the brave woman's effort. He swung her lightly towards the window and joined the others, who, in spite of a brave struggle, easily mastered Chester and got him down, after they had swayed here and there close by the locked door.

"Now," said James Clareborough, pistol in hand, as Dennis knelt upon the prostrate man's chest, Robert and the professor each holding an arm. "You will lie still, doctor, or you will force me to prescribe. You see that the situation is critical—Ha! Marion! Come away!"

He pointed his weapon at the window, but Marion did not stir. She had sprung to it while they were occupied with their prisoner, swung open the heavy shutters, and the window had yielded silently, leaving the room open to the street. Then she had reached out, holding on by the lower bar of the sash, but turned her head to look back.

"Now," she cried wildly, "fire if you dare! Fred Chester! Here. Rob, help him, for my sake. Ah! keep back, or I shriek for the police."

Chapter Thirty One.

"Sauve Qui Peut."

Marion, in her desperation, thoroughly now at bay and fierce in her reckless determination to save her lover's life, uttered her warning words to James Clareborough, who had been stealing round the table to spring at her.

"What's the matter, ma'am?" cried a gruff voice at the area railings, and Marion turned to see, to her horror, the sturdy figure of a helmeted constable. "Fight? Pistols? All right." A piercing whistle rang out, and the man signalled with his arm, while the passers-by began to stop and collect.

"Curse her! she has done it," cried James Clareborough, savagely, and he was in the act of taking aim at the trembling woman, when the pistol was struck up by Robert.

"All right," said the scoundrel, without resenting the act, and thrusting the pistol into his pocket. "The game's up, gentlemen—sauve qui peut."

Robert had passed him by this time, caught his sister's hand, and meeting with no resistance, he drew her from the window, shut and fastened it, and closed the shutters again, just as a loud peal was heard at the door bell.

The next minute Chester was at her side, the library door unlocked, and his other assailants gone.

"He's right," said Robert, hoarsely; "the game is up, Marion, and it is sauve qui peut."

"You villain!" cried Chester, excitedly.

"That will do, doctor," said Robert, coolly. "She's fainting; help me to get her away. Poor old girl! she loved me," he continued, kissing his sister's ghastly face, "and she did it to save you, not to hand me over to the police. One moment. Hold her; I'll be back directly."

Chester caught the half-fainting burden willingly, and glanced after the young man as he darted from the room.

"Gone," muttered Chester. "Marion, look up, love; we are safe. They have escaped."

"Now then," cried Robert Clareborough, returning; "I have slipped the bolts, and it will take them an hour to break in.

Come!"

"Come! Where?" cried Chester angrily.

"Where you will, doctor, only we must escape from here. The others are off, and I must go and help save the rest. You don't wish to see her in the hands of the police, appearing against her brother and his confederates?"

"God help me, no!" cried Chester.

"Come along, then, man. It's all over now. I knew it must come. Doctor, you saved my life. I must trust you. I know you love her, and that she loves you. I trust her to your honour as a gentleman."

"You may," said Chester, "and—"

"Don't talk, man. Come while the way is open. They'll break in, as sure as we are here. Come."

Chester lifted Marion in his arms and bore her toward the door, Robert Clareborough having caught up the doctor's hat, and led the way into the hall, where the police were thundering at the door; and then downstairs, where sounds were heard from the area, as if someone was trying the door there.

"Shall I take her?" said Robert, as they reached the lower passage.

"No; I can carry her easily."

"This way, then," and to Chester's astonishment he turned into the short passage at the end of which was the ordinary-looking door.

"Humph! shut," he said, with a bitter laugh. "Jem's parting act of kindness; he must have been the last."

"Where does that door lead?" cried Chester, as Marion uttered a sigh indicative of recovery.

"To safety, doctor," said the young man, sadly. "Foxes always have a second hole, and a way of using it."

He drew a key from his pocket, flung open the door, and made room for his companion to bear his sister into the square lobby, which was littered with wedges, the powder tin, pistols, keys, hammer, and the other contents of the portmanteau standing in one corner, while in one spot a quantity of sawdust seemed to have been spilled.

All was plainly seen by a bright reflected light which shone out from the small glass bulb in the ceiling, shedding a strange glow, while the odour of exploded powder struck on Chester's nostrils at once.

As soon as they were inside, Robert calmly drew the door close, and just then Marion opened her eyes and looked wildly from one to the other.

"Where am I?" she said faintly.

"Where you have never been before, sis, but quite safe," replied her brother. "There, don't look like that; the doctor and I are friends."

"Ah, I remember now," she cried wildly, and she struggled to her feet, and seized her brother's arms. "Oh, Rob, what have I done?"

"The best thing you ever did in your life. I am glad it has come to an end; but I must be off. I can't face the dock. Too great a coward, I suppose, dear. There, God bless you! I hope you'll be very happy now."

"No, no, Rob! I cannot leave you."

"Eh?" he said, smiling bitterly, as he took out another key. "Yes; he has promised me, dear, and he is as true as steel. There, I trust him, and you feel as if you can. Take her somewhere, doctor, where the police cannot find her out. She's innocent enough, but no one would believe. Come, we may as well get right away, though I suppose it would be hours before they could get through here. I never thought I should some day be showing you our secrets, sis," he continued lightly; "certainly not to Dr Chester. There we are."

He had thrust the small bright key he had held into the lock of the iron door, and turned it, the bolts yielding easily in spite of the grit of powder still left in; and clinging now to Chester's arm as the door was swung open, Marion, at a word from her brother, stepped forward into the iron-floored receptacle, then he followed and closed the door behind him with a sharp metallic clang.

In the demoralisation which had ensued it had been undoubtedly *sauve qui peut*, only one of the party seeming to think of anyone else. This was the old professor, who hurried upstairs, unlocked the chamber door, and brought down his wife, who proved well enough to follow him.

The result was that when Robert Clareborough, to Chester's wonderment, hurried his companions through passage and crypt, and up again into the book-cumbered house, all was perfectly still, the dusty place looking as if it had not had a soul therein for years.

"This way, Marion," said Robert, coolly. "Poor old uncle! he will break his heart about leaving his books; pretty choice, too, some of them."

There was no reply, and he led sister and doctor out through the back door, down a weed-grown, desolate-looking garden, and into the stables at the bottom, the entrance being open.

"Now then," he said, "you must lose no time. Once out in the mews, make for the street, and you are safe. Good-bye,

Marion dear.”

“No, no, Robert!” cried Marion, flinging her arms about his neck; “you are still weak and ill. I cannot leave you.”

“You prefer to go with me?” said the young man, smiling.

“Yes.”

“Ah, well, it’s very good of you, old darling, but you can’t; perhaps in an hour I shall be in a police cell.”

“Rob!”

“True enough, old girl; and if I am, with the knowledge that you are arrested too, I shall make an end of myself.”

“Oh no, no, no!”

“But I shall. You know me. I don’t make empty threats. Listen: you must escape. Jem and Paddy are on the way to the station by now, to fetch those two away from The Towers. Be sensible, and we shall all get away. You will obey me, dear?”

“I always have, Rob.”

“Then go with the doctor. We’ll trust him. Now, not a word. If you keep me still talking, we shall have the police round here at the back, and be all taken before we can get away. Chester, I trust you, even if I am a scoundrel. Now then, out in the mews, and walk together. Take no notice of me, and don’t think I am forsaking you, Marion. I must go, or you will be taken too.”

Chester took Marion’s hand and drew it through his arm, as he stepped out into the mews, and making a desperate effort to preserve her calmness, the trembling girl walked steadily by his side as they made for the end of the place, Robert Clareborough passing them coolly enough on the other side, lighting a cigar as he walked on fairly fast.

Just as Robert reached the end of the mews, a dozen yards in front of them, Marion started as if a sudden spasm had shot through her, for a couple of policemen suddenly turned the corner, hesitated as they saw him and seemed about to stop, but the young man’s coolness saved him. For just as they were hesitating he turned off the narrow pavement into the road and crossed diagonally toward them.

“Can you direct me to Vincent Square?” he said.

One of the constables gave the route, with the firsts and seconds to right and left, and as Chester and Marion were passing, the young man said shortly—“Thanks, I see,” and they heard his step behind, while the police continued their way down the mews.

“I’ll take a cab as soon as we get a little farther away. Try and be calm,” whispered Chester. “Your brother has escaped.”

“Is—is he followed?” said Marion, faintly.

“No; his coolness saved him. The police have gone on down the mews, but I dare not look round to see if they are on our track.”

She made no reply, but hung more heavily upon his arm, while he tried hard to recover his own composure and think out what was best to be done under the circumstances.

His first thought had been to take a cab, but feeling that they might still be watched, or, if not, that the various cabmen about would be questioned as to whom they took up close to the mews, or else, upon the matter getting into the papers, that they might volunteer the information, he decided to make first for the railway, and with Marion hanging more and more heavily upon his arm he led her out into the main street, nodded to the first passing cab-driver, and said, “Victoria.”

“Where are you taking me?” said Marion, faintly, as he sank back beside her.

“Where you will be safe,” he replied, pressing her hand. “You have promised to trust me, so sit still and take no heed of the way I take you. I don’t think we are watched, but it is impossible to say.”

He heard her draw her breath painfully, and as he glanced sideways he could read in her face the effort she was making.

She saw that he was watching her, and met his eyes firmly.

“Do you think Rob will escape?” she asked.

“I feel sure that he will. The police did not know him by sight. But he was only just in time. A few seconds more, and he—we—must have been taken.”

She was silent for a time, and then she said bitterly, “I ought not to have left him, poor fellow! It was cowardly at such a time.”

“You did quite right,” said Chester, firmly. “Your presence would have been a hindrance to him in his endeavours to escape, and for your sake, horrible as all this is, I hope he will get right away.”

“But I ought not to have left him,” sighed Marion, and further conversation ceased, for the cab stopped and they entered the station.

Here Chester took tickets for Kensington. Then he crossed to the other side of the line, and took tickets back right to the City, and leaving the station there, plunged with his companion amongst the busy throng which filled the streets, and finally, feeling pretty confident that they were not followed, he ended by taking a cab to Raybeck Square.

Marion started as she heard the address given, and there was a look of reproach in her eyes as she said once more—

“Where are you taking me?”

“Where I believe you will be safe,” he said gravely; “to my aunt and sister, who will welcome you as the lady who will be my wife.”

“Your wife! Oh no, no, no!” she said sadly. “That is impossible now.”

“Why?” he whispered tenderly.

“Why?” she cried. “Did you hear? Can you not see how I am linked with those who are flying from justice? Heaven help me! I ought to be with them still.”

“Hush!” he said gently; “you are wildly excited now. Your brain is not in a condition to think calmly and dispassionately of your position. It may be days before it recovers its balance. Till then, Marion, try and think this one thing—that you are watched over by one to whom your honour and safety are more than his own life. Marion, my own—my very own—let the past be dead; the future shall be my care.”

She sighed piteously and shivered, as she lay back in the corner of the cab, and, startled by her manner, he hurriedly took her hand.

She shrank back, looking wildly at him, till she fully realised his object, and then with a weary smile upon her lip she resigned her hand.

“You are utterly prostrated by the shock of what you have gone through,” he said gravely. “We shall not be long now. Try—try hard to be calm. The distance is very short, and then you will feel safe and soon grow composed.”

She gave him a grateful look, and then closed her eyes, lying back with her face ghastly pale, and the nerves at the sides of her temples and the corners of her lips twitching sharply at times, as if she were in pain.

But she sat up when the cab stopped, and gave Chester her hand as she alighted, and walked with him up the steps and into the house.

As the door closed she turned to him wildly and tottered slightly, but when he made a movement to catch her in his arms, she shrank away, and he drew back and offered his hand.

She laid hers within it, and his first thought was to take her into his consulting-room, but he led her upstairs towards the drawing-room, and she walked firmly enough till they were nearly at the landing, when he felt her swerve, and but for his quick action she would have fallen back.

“My poor darling!” he whispered, as he lifted her in his arms. “You have done most bravely. It has been too much for any woman to go through.”

It was but a few steps, and then he paused upon the landing while he threw open the drawing-room door and bore her in, quite insensible now to all that passed.

For as he entered the room Chester found himself face to face with his sister; but she was not, as he had anticipated, alone. Isabel was with her, and they stood gazing at him as if stunned by the sudden intrusion.

Chapter Thirty Two.

Something in the Sawdust.

Highcombe Street gradually became blocked by the eager crowd always ready to gather, discuss and microscopically magnify the event that has been the attraction, and in a very short time it was current that a dreadful deed had been perpetrated in open daylight at the window of the ground floor room on the left of the front door. The victim was said to have been seen shrieking wildly for help, till a man had dragged her away, closing the window afterward and shutting the shutters, so that, with the blinds of the upstairs windows drawn down, the whole of the mansion had a strangely-mysterious aspect which, to the over-heated brains of many of the lookers-on, exactly suggested the place where, a murder might have been committed.

It did not occur to the wonder-gulpers that there were several houses in the same street presenting precisely the same aspect consequent upon their owners being out of town, and that the mansion next door, with its gloomy, unkempt aspect and soot-coated windows, was much more forbidding; but then it had no policeman stationed at the area gate and two more at the front door, who objected vigorously to boys climbing over the railings and others trying to peer through the long, slit-like windows on either side of the entrance.

An Englishman's house is said to be his castle, and serious steps generally have to be taken by the police before they break in, the great exception to the rule being in the case of firemen, who as soon as they are convinced that their enemy is in the place, make no scruple about using their axes against door or window, setting up a ladder, and climbing in.

In this case, in despite of the excitement, matters moved slowly, the principal steps taken being upon the arrival of more police, the stationing of these at the back where there was the mews, and an attempt to get in through the garden; but here a difficulty presented itself at once; there was no garden, the space existing between the houses and stables at the bottom being built entirely over, and the stables swept away. There was no back exit, but constables were stationed

in the mews all the same so as to keep an eye upon the stabling to right and left.

Soon after, while the superintendent and sergeant were discussing proceedings, an occupant of the opposite house pointed out the fact that one of the drawing-room window blinds was flapping to and fro, suggesting that a French window in the balcony was a little way open.

The suggestion was acted upon at once. A ladder from the nearest fire station was brought, and the police were watched with breathless interest and cheered as they mounted and reached the balcony, another cheer following as half a dozen entered the great mansion and disappeared to commence searching the house, the excitement increasing as they were seen to throw open the shutters of the library windows, in which room not so much as an overturned chair caught their attention.

It due course the magnificently-furnished place was searched, the only thing peculiar there being that the bed in a quiet-looking chamber on the third floor had been evidently made that morning, but lain upon since, while the key of the door was outside.

No way out at the back was discovered from the ground floor, and after a careful search for the missing occupants in every room, the police descended to the basement, everything above being in so quiet and orderly a state that the whole affair began to assume the aspect of imagination on the part of the constable who had given the alarm.

"Didn't dream you'd got a case on, Dick, did you?" said the superintendent, banteringly, as the pantry was entered.

"Don't look like it, do it, sir?" replied the man, triumphantly pointing to the table, on which lay the freshly-cut rope which had bound the housekeeper.

"Humph! Don't see much in that," said the superintendent. "There's the plate-closet. Well, that's all right. Someone's been having wine. Nothing to wonder at in that when there's plenty. Splendid place; but the case begins to look to me like a flam."

"Why, there's plenty outside saw the lady, too, sir," grumbled the constable.

"Then where is she?"

There was no answer, and the various domestic offices were examined, everything being in perfect order, and the only exit apparent being through the area door, which was locked, bolted and barred, as were all the windows.

"Where does this lead?" said the superintendent, as he entered the passage farther back. "Another cellar, perhaps." They followed to the end, one of the men striking a match or two, for the extreme part was dark. "Humph! locked. Well, that can't be a way out, for there is no mat." Sniff, sniff! "What's that—powder? and what's that empty Gladstone doing there?"

Just then the constable who had given the alarm suddenly stepped forward and stooped down.

"What is it, Dick? One of the straws out of the mare's nest?" said the superintendent.

For answer, the man drew at something quite low down by the floor, and it came away in his hand, to prove, on being held to the light of a wax match, a mere scrap of a handsomely-braided silk dress.

"Ah!" cried the superintendent, showing the first signs of excitement, "smell of powder—that bit of silk!"

He thumped with his knuckles on the panel of the door, and exclaimed—

"There's an iron inside; dress caught as they passed through, and as the door was shut the edge cut that off like a pair of shears. There's a way out here, my lads, and we've got hold of the clue."

It seemed easier to point out the clue than to follow it, for the door was strong, and it was not until suitable implements had been fetched, to further excite the crowd, and a sturdy attack made at the end of the passage, that the outer door gave way, the bolts of the strongly-made lock being broken right off.

"By George! you've got hold of a case this time, my lad," cried the superintendent; "but it's an attempt at a big burglary. This isn't a way out; it's the principal plate-closet, and they've been trying to get it open, and failed. Hammer leather-covered, wedges, pistols, dark lantern smashed, tin of powder, and marks on the front of the safe door where the wedges have been. Powder smells quite strong here. They must have tried to blast the door open. Out, all of you; they're hiding somewhere. They can't have got away."

The men turned back, all but the one who had given the alarm, and he had struck a fresh match, for the bulb in the ceiling gave forth no light, and was stooping down to sweep away some of the sawdust on the floor.

"Come along, Dick," cried the superintendent. "What have you got there?"

"Look, sir," said the man, holding out a handful of the sawdust he had scraped up. "There's a bottle yonder that's had port wine in it, but this looks to me like blood."

Chapter Thirty Three.

Tom Tiddler's Ground.

"Blood of the grape!" cried the superintendent, contemptuously. "Where were you brought up? Never in a gentleman's wine cellar before? You should go down to the docks and see the floors there. By Jingo! but it is blood!"

More of the sawdust was scraped aside, and the truth was plain enough; a broad patch had lain there, and the

granulated wood had been thrown over to soak it up.

But the constable was not satisfied yet; he kept peering about, made his way to the iron door, and then dropped upon his knees.

"Here you are, sir," he cried. "They've put the body in here, it seems to me, for there's a tiny smutch just against the edge. There's been murder done."

"You're right, Joe," cried the superintendent, sharply; "but where are the men? You stay here, I'll have the place searched again."

Every nook and corner of the basement was examined without result, and then the rest of the house was carefully gone over once more, but the place proved to be empty, and the superintendent returned to where his sentry was on duty.

"Made anything out, sir?"

"No."

"What about the roof? Must be a trap, and they've got through there."

"There is a trap, my lad, but the cobwebs over it show that it can't have been opened to-day."

"What about the cellar, sir?"

"I have searched all but the wine cellars, and we can't break in there. I've sent orders to find out who lives here and telegraph to the family to come up."

"But you won't wait, sir, before getting this iron door open?"

"No, I sha'n't wait for that."

"That's right, sir. They've killed the poor lady I saw, I'm afraid, and she's lying in there. That must be a bit of her dress."

There was no further hesitation. Suitable workmen were obtained, and after many hours' toil the great iron door was drilled and prised off, the police stepping forward at once to raise the body they expected to find, and then standing dumbfounded at seeing that there were a couple of shelves upon one side. The rest of the iron closet was perfectly empty.

A little further investigation by the aid of lights soon showed, though, that the supposed strong-room full of costly jewels and plate was only the entrance to another place, one side forming a door.

This was attacked in turn, and after a long resistance was forced off by the workmen, and once more the police advanced on the tip-toe of expectation, to find themselves in a passage leading into a crypt-like chamber which had evidently been carefully elaborated out of the old cellarage, traces of which still remained. But there was no sign of occupation, and for a few moments the police hesitated as to which of the two closed doors they should attack. These were both of iron, which, like those of the safe they had passed through, were evidently of Belgian manufacture, from the name embossed thereon.

But the hesitation soon passed away, for while one proved to be locked the other was unfastened, and after leaving a couple of men on guard, the superintendent passed on, leading the way through the farther door. Beyond was a dark passage cumbered with packing-cases, stacked on one side from floor to ceiling, while on turning into another passage which ran at right angles, they came upon a couple of heavy chests in the course of being unpacked, a heap of old books standing upon the corner of one.

They examined the place, the basement of a mansion with double kitchens, servants' hall, pantry, and the like, and the cursory glance obtained showed them that the crypt-like vaults through which they had passed must be beneath the garden at the back of the house.

But after satisfying themselves that no one was there they ascended a flight of stone steps, to find themselves in the book-encumbered hall of the professor's home. Then followed a quick search through the chambers of what proved to be an enormous library, room after room being covered with dusty book-shelves, the home of spiders innumerable, while only one chamber on the second floor proved to be a bedroom.

Still, there was no trace of those they sought, and a little further examination showed that they must have passed out into the garden, entered the stabling at the bottom, and gone out into the mews at the back, and without doubt before the men were sent round to watch.

"No capture yet," said the superintendent, grimly; "but it seems to me, Dick, that you'll get your promotion over this bit of mystery, for a nice game of some kind has been carried on, and we haven't got to the bottom of it yet I want that other door open now."

They descended to the crypt again, and paused before the locked iron door, which, thanks to the experience gained in opening the others of the same make, the workmen forced in the course of an hour, and at the first flash in of a bull's-eye lantern a suppressed hiss of excitement escaped from the officer's lips.

"At last!" he muttered. "It's murder, then, after all, but where's the girl?"

For there, just as they had been carried in, ready for future disposal, lay side by side, in the bottom of the roomy iron closet, the bodies of the two servants, each with a bullet wound in the head, such an one as would produce almost instant death.

They were carried out and laid upon a broad table of massive make, and as soon as this was done the superintendent examined the iron closet, whose back was covered with a perfect nest of drawers, one of which on being opened proved to be full of carefully-done-up rouleaux, the greater part of the rest being similarly filled.

One of the rouleaux was torn open, and a portion of its contents poured into the officer's hand.

"Sovereigns," he said. "Why, they must have had to do with some bank. Eh, what?"

"Duffers," said the constable addressed as Dick. "A gang of smashers."

"It isn't a time for making jokes," said another of the men, who was handling a couple of sovereigns, "or I'd say you was a duffer. Look at that; hark at this."

He handed one coin to the man, and rang another on the heavy table, for it to give out the true sound of sterling gold.

"No smashing here," said the superintendent.

"Then what does all this mean?" said Dick, directing the light of the lantern he carried across to the far end of the vault. "There's all the tackle—rolling mill, die stamps, and the rest of it."

"Bah! coiners melt their stuff and electro-gild it. These are right enough, and there's a big sum of money in there. Here, to work at once; I must have that door back in its place and the front sealed up."

His man shook his head, and while the superintendent was busy directing the workmen, the constable carefully examined the elaborate machinery, and came upon a couple of chests full of little ingots which seemed to be of the right size for rolling out and stamping into coin.

"I know!" he muttered at last.

"What do you know?" said the superintendent.

"They must be South Africa people with a gold mine of their own, and to save trouble make up their own stuff into sovereigns. Here, I want to look at those poor chaps again."

The superintendent seemed disposed to bid him let them be, but he was beginning to feel more and more confidence in his subordinate's brains, and together they flashed the light over the ghastly faces.

"That's right," said the constable. "I know 'em well. It's the butler and footman from next door. I've often seen 'em."

"Then I've got a theory now," said the superintendent, clapping his subordinate on the shoulder. "You're right, I think, about their coining their own gold, and they came back to town—you see, Dick, the people of the house were out of town."

"Yes, been out some time. I know that."

"Well, they came back, and caught these two chaps breaking into the way to their underground bank, and they treated them like burglars, and shot them. Then there was a row; that lady you talk about wouldn't stand it; you raised the alarm."

"And they've sloped. Ah, we ought to have had them, sir."

"Oh, we'll do it yet. They can't get away very far, my lad. Now then, what are you thinking about now?"

"All those quids, sir. I'm sure I'm right now. Big swells like they were, as I've often seen, with tip-top carriages and horses, wouldn't coin their own gold even if they'd got a mine. They're a gang of coiners, sir, and so you'll see. Got one of the sovs., sir?"

"No."

"Then take one of those little bars, and have that examined."

The superintendent picked up one of the ingots, looked at it intently and shook his head.

"Ah, you can't tell by that, sir," said his subordinate. "I say, look, sir; they've had the electric light. I wonder where they turn it on."

The place was soon found, the stud pressed, and about a dozen glass bulbs shed a beautifully soft light through the arched place.

"Good gold; a big sum of money in ingots, my lad," said the inspector, jingling two bars together and producing a musical sound. "Here, stop! I must have all these in that strong closet before we go—and double my sentries," he muttered. "Why, there must be thousands of pounds' worth lying here."

Chapter Thirty Four.

A Sharp Shock.

As Chester entered the room, and found himself face to face with the woman he had so cruelly used, he involuntarily caught Marion's arm, placed it beneath his own, and drew a deep breath as if prepared to defend her against any attack.

Marion shivered slightly and pressed to his side, while Isabel gazed at her wildly and fixedly, before letting her lids drop over her eyes, and standing there breathing painfully, with one hand resting over her heart.

Chester glanced at her with a feeling of despair and misery rising in his breast, but he turned his pitying gaze away and spoke to his sister, who stood drawn up to her full height, frowning, and as defiant as the brother upon whom she fixed her eyes as he spoke.

"Laura," he said gently, "I have brought this lady here as a man brings one who seeks sanctuary—safety from a terrible peril."

"Well?" she said coldly.

"I bring her to you, my sister, asking you—to let her find the refuge and safety of which I have spoken. You will do this for my sake?"

"No!" cried a sharp voice from the door—a voice which sank from time to time in its owner's excited state, so that her words were only half audible—"No, she will do nothing of the kind. How dare you bring her here to insult the lady to whom you were betrothed?"

Chester turned upon the speaker angrily, but after the first word or two his voice softened down, and he spoke as one suffering deeply from his emotion.

"Aunt, you have no right to speak to me like this. Remember, please, that something is due to me; far more to the lady for whom I ask protection and a welcome."

"No, no," whispered Marion. "For pity's sake take me away from here."

"No," said Chester, firmly. "This is my house, and you will stay here. Laura, you heard what I said?"

"Yes, Fred; I heard what you said," she replied in a cold, unemotional way.

"Then give Miss Clareborough the welcome I ask of my own sister."

"No!" cried Aunt Grace, angrily.

"Aunt," said Laura, coldly, "have the goodness to be silent. No, Fred, I cannot do what you say. It is an insult to Isabel and to me to make such a request."

"Have you no pity for me?" whispered Marion, reproachfully. "How can you expose me to this?"

He passed an arm round her waist and led her to a chair.

"Isabel," he said gently, and she started and raised her eyes, to gaze at him fully, "you must know I could; not dream that you would be here. You will forgive me, too, for what I am compelled to say."

She bowed her head gently and once more veiled her eyes, while Chester stood by the chair holding Marion's hand.

"Aunt Grace, I insist upon your being silent. You have no voice in this matter. Laura, I tell you again that this lady is in grievous peril and needs all a sister's help. I ask that help of you; will you give it?"

Laura was silent for a few moments; then she turned and gazed at Isabel, ending by throwing her arms about her, and then facing her brother once more.

"Well?" he said bitterly.

"It is impossible, Fred. If you have forgotten all that was due to Isabel, I cannot. No; and if aunt leaves this house I go with her."

"I insist then," cried Chester, angrily.

"No," said Marion, rising. "I must go. It is not right."

"I am the best judge of that," said Chester, firmly, and he retained her hand. "Isabel, I never thought that we could ever stand in such a position as this; but now, face to face, I feel bound to say once more, forgive me, and to ask you to believe the simple truth—that I should have been doing you a greater wrong in holding to our engagement and making you my wife."

She looked up at him firmly, and his heart throbbed with pity for her innocence and suffering, but there was no reproach in her clear, steadfast gaze. He read in it that she unquestioningly yielded to her fate; and at the end of a few moments her eyes fell towards the floor.

"You see," whispered Marion, faintly, "it is impossible. Let me go and join them."

"And leave me?" he whispered. "Here, water—quick! Oh, if there is an unfeeling creature upon the face of the earth, it is a woman at a time like this. Can you not see that she is fainting after the most cruel sufferings, and you all stand aside as if she were some leprous thing! Hah! Isabel!"

"Yes, Fred," she said softly.

She went down on one knee and tenderly raised the fainting woman's head till it rested upon her shoulder.

The touch seemed to revive Marion, and in a few moments she opened her eyes and gazed wonderingly at the face

so close to hers.

"You?" she said softly.

"Yes; I. He says you are suffering and in great peril. I am alone now here in London, and if you will come with me, for his sake I will be to you as a sister till the danger, whatever it may be, has passed."

"Ah!" sighed Marion, the spasm seeming to tear itself from her breast, and she lay still for some moments with her eyes closed.

"Come—sister," whispered Isabel, and she bent down and pressed her lips to the forehead so near her.

Marion's colour flushed to her temples, and she looked up wildly and flung her arms about Isabel's neck, kissing her passionately.

"Yes," she said. "I will come."

There was a tap at the door, and Chester hurried across the room to prevent the maid from entering.

"Yes," he said excitedly; "what is it?"

"If you please, sir, it is the police; two of them, and they say they must see you directly."

"Great heavens!" cried Chester, wildly, as he turned and gazed at where Marion had started to her feet and stood pale and ghastly, for she had heard the words. "Too late—too late! Yes; I know. Marion, that hound! that fiend! He is taken, and in his cowardly revenge he has sent them here."

In the full belief that the police would be coming up to the room, Chester ran to the door.

"Where are they?" he whispered sharply to the maid, who was wondering at the undue excitement displayed.

"In the hall, sir."

Chester's mind was made up on the instant, and he turned to Isabel.

"Heaven bless you for this!" he cried passionately. "I cannot explain now, only that it is a case of great emergency. Take Miss Clareborough with you, and keep her until I write or come. I do not deserve this at your hands, but your presence here is like that of some good angel. You will take her home?"

"Yes," she said softly, as she avoided his eyes.

"Listen, then," he whispered anxiously.

"These people below have come in search of her, and she must not fall into their hands. I will go and keep, them in conversation, while you get her away at once."

"I will," replied Isabel, calmly.

"Heaven bless you!" he cried passionately, and then he turned to Marion, who looked quite exhausted.

"Go with her," he said—"at once. You will be safe there until I come."

"No," she replied despairingly. "It would be better for you—for her—that we never meet again."

He caught her hand in his.

"Refuse this, and I will not answer for the consequence," he whispered angrily. "Remember you are mine."

He hurried out, trying to be perfectly calm, met the representatives of the law in the hall, and signed to them to come into the consulting-room, and closed the door.

Chapter Thirty Five.

The Climax of a Madness.

"One minute. Sit down while I attend to this."

The inspector took a chair, but his follower, evidently a plain clothes' officer, remained standing by the door; while, as if bound to make a memorandum of some important case, Chester took ink and paper and began writing rapidly for a few minutes, listening intently the while for the sound of steps upon the stairs, every nerve on the strain, as he wondered at the patience with which the two men waited.

At last, with his heart throbbing painfully, Chester heard a faint rustling sound outside, and the front door close, just as the inspector broke the silence.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but this is a case of emergency. I should be glad if you can come at once."

"Come at once?"

"Yes," said the inspector, coolly. "Only in the next street. Case of attempted suicide. Doctor with the party wants a second opinion."

Chester drew a deep breath, wrote another line of incoherent words, and then, having hard work to speak composedly, he rose and said—

"I am at your service now."

He followed the inspector to the door, and feeling half stunned at what seemed like so strange an escape, he went to the house where, in a mad fit, the occupant had taken desperate measures to rid himself of a life which had grown hateful; and while Chester aided his colleagues for the next hour in the difficult task of trying to combat the poison taken, he could not help feeling that this might have been his own case if matters had gone otherwise, for despair would have prompted him also to take a life that had become horrible—an existence that he could not have borne.

He went back home at last, but he made no attempt to see sister or aunt, his anger for the time being was too hot against them, and he was in no disposition to make any excuse. His next step was, he felt, to set Marion's mind at rest regarding the police, and he was about to start for Isabel's temporary London home, when he hesitated, shrinking from meeting her again. He felt that his position was despicable, and now the danger was past he mentally writhed at the obligation which he had so eagerly embraced.

"What a poor, pitiful, contemptible object I must seem in her eyes," he muttered as he paced the room.

But he grew cooler after a time. Marion's happiness must stand first. She was prostrate with horror and despair, and at any cost he felt that he must preserve her from danger, and set her mind at rest.

"But I cannot go," he muttered—"I cannot face her again." Then, half mad with himself for his miserable cowardice, he cast aside the pen with which he was about to write, and determined to go.

"She will forgive me," he said; and he hurried into the hall, took up his hat, and then stopped short, aghast at his helplessness.

Where was he going? He had not the most remote idea as to where Isabel was staying, and maddened by his position, he forced himself to go up to the drawing-room and ask his sister for the address.

"I must be half mad," he muttered.

He threw open the drawing-room door and, strode in, determined to insist upon the address being given him if Laura should refuse.

But the room was empty, and, staggered by this fresh surprise and with ominous thoughts beginning to arise, he went out on to the landing to call his sister by name. Then he called aloud to his aunt, with the result that an answer to his shouts came from below in the servant's voice—

"Beg pardon, sir; Miss Laura and Mrs Crane went out more than an hour ago."

"What! Where did they go?"

"I don't know, sir. I had to whistle for a cab, and they each took a travelling bag."

Chester went down to his consulting-room, checkmated, and feeling completely stunned at his position.

What was he to do? He might set a detective to try and find the cabman who took them away, but it would be days before he could have the man traced.

Then came a bright idea.

The hotel where Isabel had been staying—the manager there would know where she and her father and mother went on leaving.

He took a cab there, but the manager did not know. He thought the old people went abroad, and the young lady went into private apartments.

"But their letters—where were their letters to be addressed?"

"To their country house, sir."

Chester hurried away again. Perhaps something might be made of that, and he went to the first post-office and telegraphed down to the person in charge of the house, paying for a reply to be sent to Raybeck Square, to which place he returned, and paced his room for two hours before he obtained the brief reply:—

"Address not known. They have not written yet.—Susan."

"Was any poor wretch ever so tortured by fate?" he muttered; and he threw himself into a chair to try and think out some way of finding out the address to which he had sent Marion.

At last, faint, and with his brain in a whirl, he sought for temporary release from his sufferings in one of the bottles of drugs in his consulting-room.

But the ordinary dose seemed to have no effect, and he repeated it at intervals twice before he sank into a state of lethargy from which he did not awaken till morning, to find himself lying back in a corner of the couch, with the three servants gathered in consultation.

"Yes," he cried wildly, "what is it?—what is the matter?"

"Nothing, sir, only that you frightened us. It's past eleven o'clock, and we were going to send for a doctor," said the parlour-maid.

"No, nothing the matter. I was tired out, and overslept myself. Here, stop! Has—has Miss Laura come back?"

"No, sir."

"That will do. Go away."

"Hadn't you better have a cup o' tea, sir?" said the cook, suggesting the universal panacea.

"No, no!" he cried, so fiercely that the servants backed out, and the wretched man let his burning, confused head sink into his hands while he tried to collect his thoughts.

But it was in vain. He bathed his temples, went into the breakfast-room and tried to partake of food, but gave it up in disgust, and finally turned to the drug again.

"This can't go on," he muttered; "the human brain cannot stand it. Months of strain now, and my position worse than ever. And even now the police may have traced her, and she be looking vainly to me for help."

He did not hear a ring at the front door, for he went back to his consulting-room, to sit with his head in his hands; neither did he hear the conversation going on after the closely-veiled lady who rang had been admitted.

"Gone! You think Miss Laura will not return?"

"I don't think so miss." There was a few moments' thoughtful silence. "Where is your master?"

"In his consulting-room, miss, in a dreadful state. Oughtn't a doctor to be fetched to him? He looks so awful; his eyes roll at you as if he was going mad."

There was another thoughtful pause, and then the visitor said firmly, "Go and ask Mr Chester if he will see me for a few moments."

"Please, miss—ma'am—I really daren't," said the maid, pitifully. "He frightened me so last time I went into the room that I'd sooner leave at once than go in."

There was a third period of hesitation, and then without a word the visitor went straight to the consulting-room, entered, and closed the door.

Chester did not stir, but sat there in the gloomy place with his head bent, the image of utterly abased despair; and the visitor stood looking down pityingly at him for some moments before she spoke.

Her voice seemed to galvanise him into life, and he started up and gazed at her wonderingly. "Isabel?" he cried. "Yes, Fred; I have come."

"Hah! and Marion? How is she?" There was no reply for a few moments; then in a low, compassionate voice, "She was very, very ill last night, but later on she dropped asleep, and I left her about three, perfectly calm and peaceful."

Chester gazed at her wildly.

"Yes," he cried, "go on."

"I went in to see her at intervals of an hour, and she was still sleeping calmly."

"And you have left her!" he cried angrily. "You should not have done this."

"No; I ought not to have done this," said Isabel, sadly. "You placed her in my charge, and I have betrayed your trust."

"What! What do you mean?"

"I went to her room about nine, and—"

"Yes," he cried, springing up and catching her arm so fiercely that her pale, sad face grew full of suffering.

"Tell me; you are keeping something back."

"Must I tell you?" she said faintly.

"Yes, yes!" he cried. "Why do you torture me?"

"Fred, I was to blame," she said piteously. "I would have done anything for your sake. I could not foresee it all. She has gone!"

"Gone?" he gasped.

She held out a letter addressed to him, and he snatched at it and tore it open, to read with burning eyes:—

"Good-bye for ever. I love you too well to come between you and the happiness that may some day be yours. Do not seek for me: my love would prove a curse. I know it—I feel it. Forgive me the suffering I have caused to you and the

gentle woman who has tended me. She will forgive you the past as I have prayed her to; and she will forgive me, knowing as she does that it was in all innocence I did her that wrong. Think of me as one who was not to blame for her position. I did not know everything; they kept it from us weak women. I did know, though, that they were engaged in some unlawful scheme, and prayed my brother to take me away; but he could not shake off his bonds—I could not leave him. Good-bye: think of me kindly. We shall never meet again.”

Chester read to the last word, then turned half round and fell heavily to the floor.

It was as if the tie which bound him to life had snapped in twain.

Chapter Thirty Six.

Why and Wherefore.

The customary inquest followed, and after careful examination of the various witnesses, and a visit to the place, the jury, by the coroner's direction, returned a verdict of "wilful murder." Then the strange affair passed into the hands of the police. The hounds of the law were laid upon the scent, and they were active enough in their efforts to run the Clareborough family down, but without success: for they had suddenly disappeared from The Towers, as completely as they had from their town mansion, but what direction they had taken was not discovered.

They were "wanted" for the clearing up of the death of their two servants, whose bodies were identified by the domestics brought up from the country house; but the witness particularly sought for was the old housekeeper, who, it was presumed, would be able to give a pretty good account of the doings at the great mansion. But she could not be found, and the suspicion at once arose that she had been murdered by the men who made the attack upon the safe after obtaining leave to go up to town on business.

Search was therefore made in the town mansion, and also in the adjoining house with the curious underground works, but without result, and the disappearance of the old lady's body added to the mystery.

The family were wanted, too, soon after, upon another charge—that of coining, for upon further investigation of the supposed wealth banked in the strong-room, it was found that the coins were base.

But it required a far more than superficial examination to prove this, official after official from the Mint declaring them to be genuine according to the ordinary tests. Their weight was absolutely correct, the workmanship was perfect, and they gave forth a true ring, but upon every sovereign being broken in half, though there was nothing to see, the coin appearing to be of gold with the proper amount of hardening metal added, the application of the acid test showed that something was wrong.

The examination of the bars of metal supposed to be gold, and discovered in the underground place beneath the old professor's house, gave the explanation, the two chests delivered by the railway company helping the matter, for after the police had removed a layer or two of old books, they came upon small oaken boxes containing ingots of the base metal used in the manufacture of the coin, these being of an ingeniously compounded alloy, whose constituents, after metallurgical analysis, the Mint authorities kept secret.

Examination of the cellarage proved quite startling, from the perfection of the dies, presses, and rolling mills, all of great power, beautifully made, but of foreign production.

There was a small furnace, too, with crucibles, and other paraphernalia, the most interesting find being the small ribbons of metal from which the round counter-like flats had been punched, and some pieces in a box ready for being pressed.

These last ribbons of metal proved to have been made from the base metal ingots, after the old fashion of producing silver plate—before the introduction of the cheap electro-plating system—by which the pure metal is deposited upon the base.

Old silver-plated goods were made by taking a bar of copper and placing at top and bottom a thin slip of pure silver, which was made to adhere to the copper by heat. Then the silvered copper bar was passed through rolling mills till it was flattened to the necessary thickness, and came out with its due proportion of silver on both sides, ready for working up into shape, with the addition of pure silver finishings to the parts likely to be most worn.

The Clareboroughs' sovereigns were, then, thus made, careful analysis proving that each ingot of alloy was prepared with the addition of one-half of pure gold, that is to say, one fourth part at top and bottom. This was fixed in the furnace; then the ingots were rolled to the right thickness, the flats punched out, and afterwards passed through the die press, to come out so perfect that for years these coins ran current by thousands, even the banking companies receiving them without demur, and it was not till long after that Chester discovered that his two-hundred-guinea fee was all perfectly base.

The learned said the production of such coin was an impossibility, but the Clareboroughs proved to them that it was not, and the Mint authorities were puzzled by the perfection attained. But at last it was remembered that about twenty years before, a very clever metallurgist and chemist, who had held a high position at the Mint, was discovered in an offence against the rules of the establishment, which resulted in his immediate discharge and degradation, he having escaped a criminal prosecution by the skin or his teeth.

This official had married a lady of the name of Clareborough, and it was suggested by an ingenious personage as being possible that to this man was due the manufacture of the base coinage.

The right nail was hit upon the head, for at the time when, some seven or eight years earlier, the Clareborough family were, through their wild expenditure, utterly penniless and hopelessly in debt, this man, after many experiments, so advanced his project that he laid it before James Clareborough, who jumped at the idea; his brother Dennis and cousin Robert, both helplessly aground and forced to enlist in cavalry regiments, eagerly joined, and in a very small way the coining was begun, but they were terribly crippled by the cost of each piece. James Clareborough was for producing something cheap, saying that it was absurd to be making imitation sovereigns the material for each of which cost ten

shillings; but his uncle's theory was that only by the great perfection of the coins could success and immunity from discovery be assured.

The uncle had the support of the two younger men, and after a while the skill begotten from practice enabled them to produce the coins more rapidly; improved machinery was obtained from Belgium; four more impecunious members of the family were sworn in to join in the secret of what they called their private bank; and at the end of three years the mansion in Highcombe Street was taken, fitted up by foreign workmen, and by degrees the machinery brought in through the book-collector's house, and all done without a suspicion being raised.

The generally-accepted idea in fashionable sporting circles was that the wealth of the Clareboroughs came from their clever gambling transactions, and many a speculator was ruined by trying to imitate them, notably their two servants.

The various difficulties in the Clareboroughs' way dissolved upon being attacked; wealth rolled in as fast as they liked to make it, working hard under the guidance of their uncle, the professor, who kept the position of captain over them, for in spite of James Clareborough's overbearing ways, he gave up, as did the others, feeling that everything depended upon their being united. The old man's occupancy of the adjoining house, where he made his genuine love for collecting old works act as a blind for the receiving of heavy cases of metal, served them well, and the servants never once had a suspicion that there was a communication between the two buildings, or that the stern old housekeeper was the professor's wife.

Her part was well played, too. She never left the town mansion when all the servants went down to The Towers. And it was at these times that the young men came up frequently, ostensibly to visit Paris or attend meetings, but really to work hard in the well-fitted vaults to replenish the strong-room, whose contents they wasted fast.

Self-interest, as well as clannishness, held the family together. Use had made the labour of production familiar, and they might have gone on for years in their life of luxury unchecked, but for the one weak link in their chain—the strongest and most overbearing man among them. His plainly-displayed passion for his cousin had been the cause or quarrel after quarrel with Robert Clareborough, one of which culminated in blows, the use of the revolver, and Marion rushing off, believing her brother dying, for the aid of the surgeon with whose name a recent case had made her familiar.

Of the further career of the family nothing more was known in England. The police were indefatigable, but they had keen, shrewd men to deal with, and the culprits completely disappeared. Suspicions were entertained that they might have had something to do with the distribution of a great deal of base coin in Germany, but it was never traced home to them, and to all intents and purposes the name of Clareborough soon died out and the mysterious business in Highcombe Street was forgotten.

Chapter Thirty Seven.

Chester Awakens from his Dream.

It was not until after many days of wild delirium that Fred Chester unclosed his eyes with the light of reason to make things clear once more. He was in his own room, and he lay wondering why he was unable to raise a hand or turn his head without difficulty.

He lay for some time trying to think out what had happened in an untroubled way, for a restful sensation pervaded his being, and it did not seem to matter much till he became conscious of a peculiar, soft, clicking sound, which he knew at last to be caused by a needle coming in contact with a thimble.

It came from somewhere to his left behind the curtain, which was drawn to keep the sunshine which came through the open window from his face.

This afforded him fresh food for thought, and by degrees he turned his head a little, till he could lie and watch the curtain, and wonder who was beyond.

That was all. He felt no temptation to try and speak, for it seemed, in a pleasant, dreamy way, that sooner or later he would know.

It was sooner. For all at once, as he lay watching, the sewer bent forward a little, so that she could gaze at the face upon the pillow, and their eyes met, those of the nurse turning wild and dilated as she started up and hurried from the room.

"Isabel—you!" he said, in a mere whisper of a voice, but she did not stay, and the next minute, as the sick man still lay wondering, the door was opened again and Laura entered.

"Oh, Fred, Fred, my own brother!" she cried, as she sank upon her knees by the bedside and pressed her lips to the thin white hand lying outside the sheet.

"Laury," he said, feebly; "you, dear? Wasn't that Bel?"

"Yes, yes; but you must not talk. Oh, thank God! thank God, you know us once again!"

"Know you?" he said, smiling, "of course. Where's aunt?"

"Downstairs, dear, asleep. She is so worn-out with watching you."

"Watching me?" he said, with a little child-like laugh. "Yes, of course, she is always watching."

He gently raised his hand, to place it upon his sister's head, and it lay there passive for some time, till Laura realised that her brother was fast asleep; and then she stole away to join Isabel in the next room.

The next day Chester was a little stronger, but it was as if his mind was passing through the early stages once more,

he was so child-like and weak; and it was not until the third day of his recovering his senses after the terrible brain fever through which he had passed that he remembered Isabel again, and asked if he had not seen her there.

Laura told him yes, that she had been there, and he asked no more; but as the days went on he learned all. That his sister had returned to town with his aunt and written to the servant from their hotel to pack up the clothes and books they had left behind, and received an answer back that Chester was dying of brain fever.

This brought sister and aunt to his side, to find that Isabel had been with him from the first, watching him night and day. Then they shared the task with her, till the first rays of reason began to shine out of his eyes.

“But where is she now? Why does she not come?” he said rather fretfully.

“She left directly you seemed to be out of danger, Fred.”

“But how unkind. Why should she do that?”

“Why, Fred—why?” said his sister gazing at him wonderingly. “Oh, brother, brother, you do not grasp all yet.”

Laura Chester was wrong; he did grasp it at that moment, for the past came back like a flash, and he uttered a low groan as he recalled the contents of that letter, the words seeming to stand out vividly before his eyes.

From that hour his progress towards recovery was slower than before, and he lay thinking that the words contained in that letter were true—that it was good-bye for ever and that his life was hopelessly wrecked.

The return of health and strength contradicted that, though, as a year passed away, and then another year, in the course of which time he learned that the discoveries in Highcombe Street had been forgotten by the crowd, other social sensations having blurred them out.

His own troubles had grown fainter, too, as the time wore on; but for two years he did not see Isabel again. Then they met one day by accident and another day not by accident, and by slow degrees, while tortured by shame and remorse at having, as he told himself, thrown everything worth living for away, he learned what a weak, foolish creature a woman who has once truly loved a man can be, and said, as many of us say—

“What a miserable desert this world would be if there was no forgiveness for such a sin as mine!”

The End.

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