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Author: Richard Dowling

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THE WEIRD SISTERS.

A Romance.

BY

RICHARD DOWLING,

AUTHOR OF "THE MYSTERY OF KILLARD."

In Three Volumes.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE ST., STRAND.
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CHARLES DICKENS AND EVANS,
GREAT NEW STREET, LONDON.

TO
EDMOND POWER, ESQ.,
OF SPRINGFIELD,
Whose kindness to Mine and to Me
I SHALL NEVER FORGET
WHILE I AM.

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THE WEIRD SISTERS.

PART I. A PLAIN GOLD GUARD.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SHADOW ON THE TOWER OF SILENCE.

After giving way to the feelings which had overwhelmed him in the passage, and which had almost betrayed him at the bedside, Grey, by a great effort, collected himself and walked soberly and deliberately until he found the grand staircase of the Castle. This he descended, and when he reached the bottom hastily sought the courtyard, and from the courtyard the grounds.

"I thought it would have killed me in that room. I wish it had," he whispered to himself, as he passed aimlessly over the short dry grass. "No, no, no, no, no! I must not think of it. I must think of something else."

He was now beyond the range of the Castle windows, in a little fern-clad hollow above a miniature cove.

"Who said I was a coward?" he demanded, in a loud harsh voice, looking fiercely round on the cool silver river that lisped soft whispers at his feet and made low melodious concord of its rippling surge, filling the ear with memories of the far-off sea.

"Who said I was a coward?" He repeated the question to the grave oaks standing above him, motionless and voiceless against the opal ocean of the unclouded sky.

"No coward. I never quailed. I never winced. I held up my head as fearlessly as any undaunted soldier kneeling upon his coffin facing the firing-party. I was not afraid of anything. I only thought I should die there and then. I am sorry I did not die."

He seemed to imagine himself in a dock, and the huge oaks the grave and grey jury empanelled to try him, and the sweet low voice of the river the indictment that never ceased to sound.

"I own I quailed when I heard his first words from the threshold, but that was when he accused me of what I have done." He had once more dropped his voice to a cautious whisper.

"Who would not, being a thief, quake at being called a thief for the first time by the man he had stolen from, and in the presence of her for whom the vast savings of a lifetime had been laid by? No man could have helped quailing at that. But when the old man showed his confidence in me unbroken, when he swore me to take care of her property and of his child, when he kissed, Oh, God! when he kissed my hand, did I quail? No. I stood it like a man. *That* was the vulgar end of the coarse objective tragedy. That was the poison-bowl, the dagger-thrust. That was the breaking of the last bone on the wheel. I am dead since then. But *that* was only the bell for the curtain to go up on the other tragedy, the subjective play. I am enrolled among the immortals. I play the chief part in a tragico-farce by the Angel of Night. I play the leading part. The stage is in the nether depth. I play to an audience of everlasting Outcasts. The audience are assembled, the curtain is up. I forget my cue, and the prompter is asleep. Judas, I forgot my cue, and the prompter is asleep. What am I to say? What am I to do, comrade Judas?"

"Mr. Grey, I have been looking for you, sir. You are wanted at the Castle, please, sir."

Mr. Grey turned round and saw just above him, on the edge of the little hollow, Sir Alexander's old servant, Michael.

"Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, Michael, is it you?" Mr. Grey laughed and asked.

"Yes, sir," answered Michael promptly, as though he were accustomed to finding his identity doubted.

"I was rehearsing a part I am going to take in an amateur play, Michael, just to get the memory of poor Sir Alexander out of my mind. Well, am I wanted at the Castle?"

"Yes, please, sir; and you will please to come at once. Mrs. Grant wants to see you. The doctors have been, and I am afraid there is bad news about Sir Alexander."

"I hope not, Michael. I shall run. You can take your time."

And with these words the banker started off at a quick pace.

He found Mrs. Grant sobbing violently, and for a while quite unable to command her voice. At length, after a few reassuring and encouraging words from the banker, she spoke through her sobs.

"Oh, Mr. Grey! Oh, my poor darling Maud! Oh, Mr. Grey, what are we to do?"

"It will be kindest and wisest," said he, in a conciliatory voice, "if we all try to keep as calm as we can under the circumstances. Michael told me the doctors had been here, and that the news is bad; but I do not know yet what the news is."

"Oh, my poor child! Mr. Grey, you can't tell how I feel. I, who have been with her now more than six years, until I have grown to look upon her as a daughter. Oh, Mr. Grey, this is dreadful!"

"There is nothing the matter with Miss Midharst, I trust. She is quite well?"

"Quite well."

"In health, I mean?"

"Oh, yes. But think of her thrown out of her father's place without a home or a relative, and so young and so simple."

"But, Mrs. Grant, Miss Midharst is enormously rich, and can make a most handsome home anywhere she pleases."

"But think of an upstart younger son of a whole lot of no-good younger sons turning my darling out into the cold, bleak, cheerless world, turning her out of the house of her forefathers, this grand old place. I never knew how grand it was or how I had grown to love it until now."

The poor woman, in her great sympathy for Maud, could not dissociate the ideas of leaving the home-tree and poverty. When her husband died, and the instable home-tree under which soldiers sling their hammocks had to be abandoned, there were narrow ways and the friendless world that wait on narrow ways to be encountered and endured. In her anxious sympathy she thought the heiress of a rich baronet would have the same hardship and privation to encounter as the widow of a penniless captain in a marching regiment.

The banker placed his hand firmly, though lightly, on the shoulder of Mrs. Grant, and said, in an impressive voice:

"We are all, I am sure, very sorry Sir Alexander is so ill; but we must not add to our grief for him

the fear that Miss Midharst will be unprovided for. There will be few richer heiresses, and she and her fortune shall be well taken care of. I wish you would be kind enough to tell me what the doctors said about Sir Alexander."

"Oh, Mr. Grey, I hope you will excuse me. I am so fearfully troubled and excited. I know what trouble is myself. I have had my own sad experience——"

"And the doctors said, Mrs. Grant?" interrupted the banker gently.

"Oh, Mr. Grey, I hope you will forgive me. They are in the banqueting-room, and said they would be glad to see you there."

"Thank you; I will go to them instantly. Dear Mrs. Grant, do try and keep up your spirits, for Miss Midharst's sake."

With these words he left, and walked quickly in the direction of the great room.

As he did so, the river passenger steamboat *Rodwell* went past on the outer or northern side, in front of the great archway leading to the courtyard of the Island Castle.

Mr. Grey approached the dreary state dining-room, and having entered found the three doctors seated by the open narrow windows, and looking out upon the silent peaceful scene beneath. He approached them quietly, gravely.

Dr. Hardy rose to receive him. The doctor and the banker bowed to one another; then Mr. Grey bowed to the other two doctors, and they returned his salutation with respectful inclinations of the head and in silence.

The banker broke the silence:

"Mrs. Grant informs me that you wish to see me, and I understand that you desire to communicate something very important concerning the health of Sir Alexander. I trust nothing very serious is to be told."

For a moment the three doctors stood admiring Grey, and no one of them answered him. There was such a soothing and reassuring air of capable responsibility about him at the instant, they could not withhold their respect, and it was displayed in silence.

At last Dr. Hardy found his voice:

"We are informed that you, Mr. Grey, had an interview with Sir Alexander Midharst this evening. Are we correctly informed that during the interview Sir Alexander's head was quite clear and his mind quite free from delusion?"

"Quite clear and quite free from delusion," answered the banker, as carefully as though he were sworn, and the life of a fellow-being hung on his words.

"In that interview did he seem to apprehend any disastrous ending to his illness?" asked Dr. Hardy, with weight and impressiveness.

"I cannot go so far as to say that," answered Grey, with the most circumstantial conscientiousness; "but from the nature of what occurred, I am convinced he regarded what he said as of the very highest importance."

"You are aware that he has made his will?"

"I am."

"Did what occurred between you and him this evening bear in any way upon his will? Observe, we do not want you to trouble yourself with detail; but what we want to know is this: Are you satisfied in your own mind that Sir Alexander has arranged his worldly affairs as fully as you, being a man of the world, could desire?"

Dr. Hardy put this question with all the gravity he could import into his manner.

Throughout the interview the banker could in no way satisfy himself as to what Dr. Hardy was driving at. He, therefore, framed his answers so that they might be the least discursive and most easy of corroboration. But the present question disturbed him greatly. Was all that had hitherto been on this day but the prelude to the springing of an awful mine under his feet? Did the three men now in front know what he knew? Were they a kind of lay inquisition—a species of infernal council of three—the advocate, judge, and jury destined to cause the lead to overtake the gold? But he had already endured a worse ordeal that evening, and he was not to be cowed by this. He answered in the same self-collected tone as before:

"So far as I know of Sir Alexander's affairs they are in perfect order; and in the interview which I had with him this evening, I think I am justified in assuming he added by word of mouth, and in the presence of Miss Midharst and Mrs. Grant, such matters as may not be embodied in his will, or such additions to what may be in his will as he desired to make."

The three doctors looked significantly at one another, and Grey awaited with perturbation of mind, although he preserved an indifferent exterior, the next move in this strangely shifting drama.

The doctors then nodded to one another that they had agreed to some course understood between them, and Dr. Hardy said, in a tone of relief:

"You are fully in possession, we know, of the business position of Sir Alexander's affairs. The medical position is this: A development of symptoms has occurred since you saw the patient; his mind has sunk into complete darkness, from which, in the natural course of the disease, it never emerges between this and death——"

"This is most sad," interrupted Grey.

"*But*," said Dr. Hardy, taking note of the interruption with the emphasis on the conjunction, "an operation which might accelerate death would in all likelihood give the patient a few minutes of consciousness to-night. If to-night passes without the operation it would be useless to-morrow. The question, then, is: Are you of opinion there is any need to run the risk of that operation in the hope of getting some final instruction for the disposal of the worldly affairs of Sir Alexander Midharst?"

"That is a very grave question indeed."

"A very grave question. Observe, it consists of two parts. 1. The business portion. 2. The medical portion. You are not expected to answer both responsibly. You are responsible for the business portion; we for the medical. The portion of the question you have to answer is this: Do you know of any business reason for restoring to consciousness at some risk Sir Alexander Midharst?"

"I do not."

"Then we may go. We can do no more. Good evening, Mr. Grey; you have been most admirably careful and conscientious in this matter."

The doctors bowed and withdrew.

Once more Grey found himself alone. He could not remain indoors. He felt oppressed, suffocated. He hastened into the courtyard. Having gained the grounds he turned his face to the east, and walked slowly onward with his hands clasped behind him and his chin sunk upon his breast.

How that brief interview with the doctors had altered the whole aspect of his affairs, he thought. In that terrible scene at the bedside, he had sworn to take charge of Miss Midharst's fortune; a light responsibility that was now. In that same interview he had sworn to take care of Miss Midharst; a grave responsibility that was now. And yet last night he had been thinking of the most intimate and responsible form of guardianship for her. He had been thinking if he were a widower he might marry Miss Midharst, and so cover up the great scandal. If he married her now, he should be in the best position to keep his oath to the old man.

Last night he had been affrighted by the notion of being left a widower, lest it might enter Sir Alexander's mind a second man should be associated with him in the guardianship of a great heiress.

All this had almost miraculously changed to meet his position. The old man was likely to live some time, but never again to possess his senses; never again to have sufficient recollection to make any change in that will in which his, Grey's, fortune and fate were wholly wound up. That was a tremendous relief.

He was becoming calmer. The memory of that scene by the bedside was gradually growing less troublesome, less insistent, less oppressive. He breathed more freely if it was for nothing else but the knowledge the repetition of such a scene had become impossible.

His thoughts ran on:

Sir Alexander might live days, weeks, months, and then after his death he, Grey, would have a whole year. Yes, a whole year! Of course he had no shadow of hope of replacing the money; but then, in, say a year and three or four months, something might happen.

He might be free.

The burden might be lifted off his shoulders and he might be free. Who could say but—

He had turned round and was looking west.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "I have missed the boat! There she goes past the tail of the Island."

The *Rodwell* had just got round the end of the Island, and was steaming west in the broad river, full in the light of the setting sun.

The air was still. Now and then the lonely notes of a lamenting thrush enriched the silence. In the whole vast arc of the heavens from the violet-purple brooding east to the full crimson activity of the splendid west, not a cloud broke the chromatic scale. There was something fierce and warlike and fine in the sun; something wasted and desolate and forlorn in the deserted realms of the east. It seemed as though the sun, that general of Time, were celebrating in the west his triumph over another day; while the eastern fields of the empyrean lay broken in hope abandoned, fit region for the reign of dusky night, for ghosts of noble hopes, and flitting phantoms of human joys. The northern plains of the heavens were pale grey blue. To the south the sky was green. Overhead a pulse of liquid pink seemed breaking through the fair soft blue, like the pink that

steals into a mother's blue eyes when she hears her baby praised and stoops to kiss it, thinking "Their praises are sweet, but they are only drops of sweetness falling into the ocean of my love."

Although Grey knew there was no chance of his overtaking the boat, he now walked west, keeping on the high ground of the island. He passed the Castle; still the boat was in view. The sight of it distracted his thoughts, and any distraction was better than the subject-matter thrust upon his attention by his mind.

From the tail of Warfinger Island to the bend of the river which would completely conceal the steamer was about two miles. The sun now lay level with the horizon. Against the blazing orb the boat steamed on. The edge of the sun had already touched the low horizon when Grey paused at the top of the high ground and looked west.

"I shall drive from the Ferry to Seacliff. It is only six miles by the road, and I can be there before the boat.

"There go my wife and five thousand pounds of—of the money I laid my hands on in an accursed hour. How strange it is that a few minutes ago when I thought of my position I never thought of that! What a whimsical thing chance is! There are Miss Midharst's five thousand pounds helping to carry my wife from Daneford to Seacliff; and here am I, who owe a hundred times that sum, and with no way out of the thing except I should chance to be at liberty to marry within a few months.

"Ah, well, let me try and think of something that's probable. Trying to square the circle is an elegant and harmless and profitable way of spending one's time; it pays much better than trying to see the way out of my mess. Possibly in a short time I may go mad. That would be a capital way out of it, particularly if my madness took the form of going over that bedside scene for ever. Bah! I am giddy already. I *must* think of something else. Let me get back. That drive to Seacliff will freshen me. Anyway I ought to be very well satisfied with the substantial events of this evening."

He turned around and began slowly retracing his steps. As he did so, he raised his eyes to the Castle.

Already the walls of the pile were steeped in the shadows of night. But the Witch's Tower—the Tower of Silence—had just caught the fierce gleam of light from the river.

He paused, looked up, and thought:

"How simple the people were long ago! They had no idea of cause and effect. They saw that this tower blazed red after all the rest of the building was laid in shadow. But the poor idiots never thought of the light on the river. I can hardly believe it. An evening like this, when there wasn't a cloud in the heavens, someone must have noticed that the light on the tower first appeared when the sun caught the river and remained steady until the sun had gone altogether. It is incredible that people were ever such fools."

He stopped.

"I will wait until it fades," he thought, by way of honouring his scorn for the past.

Presently and quickly the red glow faded from the tower.

"Now," he cried, "the sun is set, and no witchcraft can rekindle that glow for four-and-twenty——What! The light again! Am I mad already?"

Once more, beyond all doubt, the blood-red glare burnt on the summit of the Tower of Silence.

Grey turned quickly round, and looked in surprise and horror west. He shaded his eyes with his hands. He rushed forward a few paces, shaded his eyes again and looked. He swung himself into the branches of a tree, climbed up, and having reached the highest branches that would sustain his weight, glared into the west, into the track of crimson fire that shot the red shaft at the Tower.

Then he descended heavily, drowsily, as though half asleep.

When on the ground he threw himself on his face, and muttered in a thick voice:

"What is this? What is this? I have not been thinking murder, have I? I have not been thinking wife-murder? Have I? No, no, no, Grey! Not so bad as that."

Then a sudden change passed over him. He became inspired with superhuman energy and strength. He sprang to his feet, and winding his arms wildly about his head rushed towards the Castle, shouting:

"Help! help!"

CHAPTER XIII.

ON BOARD THE STEAMSHIP RODWELL.

The passenger steamboat *Rodwell* left Daneford on that evening of the 17th of August, 1866, at the usual time, with an average number of passengers for the season and her ordinary crew. She was a saloon boat, and licensed to carry three hundred and fifty passengers between Daneford and Seacliff. As a matter of fact she never, except on very rare occasions, had more than half that number on board. Her crew, all told, were fifteen; and on the evening of the 17th of August, 1866, she carried about one hundred and twenty passengers.

The saloon-deck was abaft the paddle-boxes, and after-deck passengers had access to the saloon and bridge as well as the after-deck; the fore-deck passengers were confined to the fore-deck and the fore-cabin, the latter being a dull, cheerless, dreary place, where no one ever thought of going, unless in bad weather.

Smoking was allowed on the fore-deck to the second-class passengers, but not in the fore-cabin. On neither the saloon-deck, nor in the saloon itself, was smoking permitted; but all smoking Daneford declared that, in the whole world, there could be found no place or circumstances under which a cigar might be tasted with such plenteous peace and enjoyment as upon the bridge of the *Rodwell*, while she steamed down the broad placid Weeslade of a fine summer's evening.

Although Daneford was not a straitlaced city, there was a good deal of solid propriety in the character of its people. Judged by criminal statistics, it was rather worse than the average city of its size; but if a little prodigal in its crimes, it was discreet and prudent in its sins. If it cheated, it cheated in a legitimate and business-like manner. If it got drunk, it did not brawl. Whatever wicked thing it did, it kept under the rose. So that it enjoyed the double advantage of being highly estimated for its virtue, without allowing itself the unpleasant deprivations which the pursuit of virtue requires.

As regards smoking, Daneford observed one rule in the year 1866, and of that rule a single breach could not be proved against a single resident of the city. The rule was that no man should, while walking through the streets of Daneford in company with a lady, give the death-blow to chivalry and light a cigar.

The mere fact that on the bridge of the *Rodwell* smoking was allowed secured it against the remotest chance of female incursion. The most respectable maiden ladies, who had ceased to be giddy with youth, made it a practice to look as little as possible at that bridge, and, if they could, to sit with their backs to it.

Just forward of the bridge, on the main deck, were the steward's pantry and the cook's galley. The passage between the forward house on deck and the paddle-boxes being very narrow, the view from the fore to the after deck was so much interrupted as practically to be cut off.

Under the bridge, amidships, were the engines; aft of the engines, the engine-room and stoke-hole, all in one; and farther aft still, the furnaces and boilers.

All first-class lady passengers, whether escorted by men or alone, confined themselves to the after-deck and the saloon.

The defect which had been discovered in the boiler had not become a matter of general knowledge. No one in either Daneford or Seacliff knew anything about it, except a few persons connected with the steamer and the company's office.

There was no railway from the city to the little town, but an omnibus and a coach went daily in and out, the distance between the two places being, by road, not half the distance by water.

The road was no longer a rival of the river as a highway between the two places; but if public faith got cool in the riverway, people might fall back upon the road, which of old had enjoyed the monopoly. Nothing could more effectually shake public faith in the water-way than a suspicion that weakness or defect existed in the steamer. Therefore the fact that the boilers of the *Rodwell* exhibited unfavourable symptoms had been kept a profound secret, and on the 17th of August no passenger on board the boat had the shadow of a suspicion anything was wrong.

Steadily the steamboat held her course down the Weeslade that lovely August evening.

A man with a fiddle at the bow struck up a lively air, and in a few minutes some of the younger and gayer of the forward passengers stood up and began to dance.

The men smoking on the bridge drew near the rail, and looked down with smiles of quiet cordiality upon the dancers.

Then a man with a large white hat, blackened face, huge white shirt-collar, blue-and-white calico coat, red waistcoat, and check-linen trousers approached the fiddler; and having whispered to the fiddler, the latter brought the dance-music to a stop, and the nigger minstrel stepped out into the open space just quitted by the dancers, and sang a pathetic song.

This won great applause, and caused some of the women to weep.

Then the fiddler changed the tune into one of sly and artful purport; and the nigger, assuming an attitude and a manner of audacious drollery, sang a song of such comical force that all the forward passengers greeted the end of each verse with roars of laughter, forgetting, in their own enjoyment, to applaud the singer: a form of commendation doing much more homage to the performer than all the cool and calculating approval that accepts and adopts the dry formula of

hand smiting hand as a mark of satisfaction. So successful was this song that some of the critical loungers on the bridge turned to others and said, "Not half so bad," in a tone indicating the possession of responsible critical discernment and chivalric honour in the interests of truth.

Among the men on the bridge was a merchant of Daneford accompanied by a nephew, a young lad from the country who had come on a first visit to the city; to him the merchant was indicating the various objects of interest they passed on the way down.

"This," said the merchant, pointing, "is the Foundery. Although it is called the Foundery, it is in reality, as you see, a dockyard fer building iron steamers. The last one launched was 2,500 tons register.

"That is the Cove, and there bathing is allowed all day long. The water is not clear, and the bottom is very muddy; but in the hot weather city-folk of the lower order are not nice in such matters. We haven't any clear streams or mill-ponds such as you have in the country.

"That is the Glashouse over there, and this part of the river is called Glashouse Reach.

"Farther down you see a windmill on a headland; that headland is called Windmill Head, and that large white house in the glen there is Windmill Hall, the residence of Colonel Wood Maitland, who distinguished himself in the Crimean War. A Cossack thrust at Maitland's colonel, who was wounded and propped up against a dead trooper's dead horse. Captain Wood Maitland (he was only a captain then) lifted the Cossack's lance with an up-cut. The Cossack wheeled, thrust at the captain; the lance caught the captain in the left forearm, and the shaft being wounded by the up sword cut, broke off two feet from the head, and stuck in the captain's forearm. The captain was borne down. The Cossack wheeled again and drew. Captain Maitland had lost his sword in the fall. The Cossack rode up, brandishing his sword and making again for the wounded colonel, who lay helpless against the belly of the dead horse. Captain Maitland was now unarmed and wounded. A few paces in advance of the captain was a large fragment of a shell; he rose, picked this up, and, at the moment the Cossack was within a few yards of the wounded colonel, threw the piece of the shell with all his force, and struck the horse on the head, causing the horse to swerve and the rider to lose his cut. As the Cossack swept by Captain Maitland pulled the lance-head out of his left forearm, and thrust it through the bowels of the Cossack, who rode on a little and then tumbled out of his saddle. But that was only one of a dozen or more brave things Maitland did.

"That snug little cottage under the slope on the other shore is where Samuel Sholl, the richest merchant in Daneford, lives. He is a Quaker, and many men of five hundred a year have finer houses. But this one is the most beautifully kept in the neighbourhood.

"If you look right ahead now you will see the Island. Its name is Warfinger. On the top of the hill in the Island is the Castle. Sir Alexander Midharst lives there. He has a fine property, worth more than twenty thousand a year; but he is a miser, and saves up nineteen out of every twenty pounds of his income.

"Wat Grey, the banker, a very rich man too, takes care of all Sir Alexander's money. The Castle is old, as you see, and has a deserted, lonely look.

"Wat Grey lives at the Manor, in the Manor House, another queer house, and he has called the two houses the Weird Sisters. You see that round tower. Now you can see it better as we come in front of the archway to the Castle-yard, the western tower. Well, they used to say it was haunted by the ghost of one of the wives of the family which owned it before the Midharsts came into the property. There's a tower on the Manor also, and no doubt you have heard or read of places in the East—China, I think, or maybe Rangoon—where they put their dead on the top of towers, called the Towers of Silence. The carrion birds eat off the flesh, and the bones fall through a grating. Well, Wat Grey calls these two towers the Towers of Silence.

"That level plain of grass-land between the river and these hills is called the Plain of Spears. A great number of spear-heads have been found there from time to time, and until quite lately it was supposed a battle must have been fought there. But although bones of cows and sheep have been discovered, no human bones ever turn up, and no one has been able to account for the spear-heads. You shall see many of those spear-heads in the rooms of the Weeslade Scientific Institute to-morrow.

"In that little creek there, Glastenbury Cove, three boys were drowned last year. A boat capsized in a squall of wind, and none of the three boys could swim; so they were all drowned.

"That large yellow house at the top of the dip of land is the Hon. Skeldemere Istelshore's. He is the brother of an earl, and a violent Radical. He has a large property hereabouts, and farms two thousand acres himself.

"The sun is getting down now. Twilight is the pleasantest time on the river at this season. Now, if you look back, you will see as pretty a view as there is on the whole of the Weeslade, Don't the pasture and park lands look well with the hills behind them, and dead astern, in the throat of the river, Warfinger Island with its hill, and on the top of the hill the old Castle standing out sharp against the sky, with the Tower of Silence highest of all?

"By-the-way, in a moment you will see why people got a superstitious feeling about that tower. Right in our wake is the Castle, and we are steering right into the sun. We could not be better placed to see the witch's fire dance on the tower. The sun is just dipping. Now watch the tower.

There! Did you see that? That flash on the top of the tower? That's what the people call the witch's fire. There it is again, now. I never saw it brighter—never. Look again. The boat is right in the track of the sun, and the wash of the paddles makes the light flicker. I never saw——"

At that instant he ceased to speak—for ever. An iron bar struck him at the throat, severing the head from the body, and killing also a man who stood behind him.

The after end of the bridge was flung upward, and all upon it, the living and the dead, were shot down upon the fore-deck.

Coal and planks and wreck of the saloon, and bodies of those who had been on the after-deck and in the saloon, toiled upward a moment in a dense cloud of steam and water, hung a moment suspended in air, while a dull groaning sound spread abroad from the steamer. Then all descended again, falling upon the ruined boat, upon the placid water, with thud and hiss and shriek.

For a second all was still.

Then a dull groan from those forward. Then screams and yells when it was plain the shell of the boat could not float more than a few seconds.

About fifty people were still alive.

The wreck made a drive astern. The water washed over the fore-deck, and, striking the forward bulwark, laid the steamer on an even keel for a breath's space.

Then the water rushed aft once more, and in a stern-board the stern went under water, the boat fell over to star-board, swung half-way back again, and then heeled steadily over and went down.

The boiler of the *Rodwell* had burst, and the steamer *Rodwell* had gone down before any one who still survived had had time to jump overboard.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE RIVER.

Still calling out for help, Grey reached the Castle. When he got in front of the chief gateway he paused a moment, and pressed his hand over his forehead, trying to collect his thoughts.

The *Rodwell* had blown up. Yes, that was clear. And all the people who had not been killed or drowned were now struggling in the water, and his wife had been aboard.

No good purpose could be served by alarming the people at the Castle. They could render no assistance, and they had trouble enough there just now. The best thing to do was to dash across the Island, tell the ferryman to hasten to the scene of the wreck (he could not have seen the steamer from the northern shore of the Island), jump into a boat, and pull rapidly towards the fatal spot.

Grey crossed the Island at the top of his speed; paused a moment to recover his breath; then shouted to the ferryman the news of the disaster, and, bidding him row with all his might to the place, jumped into another boat himself and pulled rapidly down the river.

Under the circumstances nothing could have been better for him than the exertion necessary for driving the boat forward.

He was a powerful man and a skilful oarsman. He bent forward and flung himself back with swift and weighty regularity, that made the boat fly. He deliberately kept his mind free from thought. He concentrated all his attention upon the physical work. When a young man he had often pulled in local amateur races, but never before with such strictly undivided attention.

"Get all way on the boat! Make her go through the water!" were the thoughts that filled his mind. Gradually as he warmed to his work he felt his power increase. He felt conscious of great skill and enormous strength.

As he drove onward muscle after muscle of his body seemed to come into sympathy with those in his legs and back and arms, to increase his force. While the muscles came into play their action stole the sluggish blood from his head, sent up his pulse, cooled his forehead, and cleared his mind.

"There is no use in thinking now. No use in my thinking until I am there and know all. *Now* I have only to make this boat fly."

As he swung himself backward and forward, and plucked the blades through the hissing water, he felt all things possible to man were possible to him then.

"I could crush this wherry flat in my arms, or command a burning ship, or lead a forlorn hope to certain victory at this moment," he thought. "But I must be careful not to break an oar. To break an oar now would be fatal. How they bend! They are the twisted ropes of the catapult, and the

wherry is the bolt, and we are going almost as fast as a flying bolt.

"That's the tail of the Island at last. There is no use in my looking round; it might disturb me. All I have to think of now is, Eyes in boat, a clean wake, and give way with a will.

"Half ebb, by the marks. Give her a sheer out into mid-stream, and get the crawl of the ebb under her. It's only a crawl compared to what we're doing, although it's a five-knot ebb."

He was out of training, and his mouth became dry, his tongue parched, and his breathing short; his muscles, under the unaccustomed strain, tingled and grew heated, and his joints fiery hot. But he felt all the better pleased for this. He took a fierce delight in squandering the magnificent resources of his strength.

"My will," he thought, "is stronger than my body and my arms and my legs, and if they fancy they are to get the better of my will I'll show them their mistake. On you go! ay, faster." And he tore the blades hissing from the water, and feathered, and switched the blades into the water without a sound or a splash.

"Already," he continued, "the Island dead astern. The Black Rock and the Witches' Tower, my Tower of Silence, in a line, and I out in mid-stream. This means I am near."

"Where are you going? Eh? Where are you going with that wherry?" Grey was hailed from ahead.

Backing water with his right hand and pulling with his left he swung the boat round, bringing her gunwale under.

He had almost run into a four-oared river fishing-boat that had a variety of floating objects in tow, and a few small things in the boat. Four or five other boats were pulling slowly hither and thither, with a man standing up in the bow of each.

When Grey ceased to pull it was growing dusk. For a moment he sat with his oars peaked, staring around him. Then he tried to speak, but when he opened his mouth his tongue rattled like a bone against his teeth, and his throat felt dusty dry. Notwithstanding that the water here was strong and brackish he leaned out of the boat, and filled his right hand and drank. Then his tongue became flexible again, and although his voice was hoarse and ragged, he could speak.

"You were here soon after it happened; how long is it now?"

Notwithstanding the gloom the men in the fishing-boat recognised him, and their manner turned to civility at once.

"Close upon an hour ago, sir. I did not know your back, Mr. Grey; and you were running right into us, and with such way on too."

"One, two, three, four, five, six," counts Grey. "Six boats?"

"Yes, sir, six boats. It's the awfullest thing ever happened on the river in my time; and I'm on the Weeslade, man and boy, upwards of forty year."

"An hour ago. I did not think it was so long. I came as quickly as I could."

"I saw you pull a punt-race twenty-five years ago, sir, and you'd have beaten your pulling in the punt then by your pulling in the wherry this evening. Ay, sir, you'd have pulled that wherry round the punt."

"How many were saved?"

"About forty."

"Were they landed at one or both sides of the river?"

"They were all landed at Asherton's Quay over there."

"Do you know—did you see any of the saved?"

"Most of them. I helped to bring in some thirteen."

"There is, if it is an hour since she blew up, no chance of any more being alive in the water, even clinging on to anything."

"No, Mr. Grey."

"Do you know——" His tongue was dry again, and he dipped his hand into the brackish water and drank out of his palm.

The fisherman shuddered at this. "It's brackish at best," thought the man; "but after what has happened—ugh! He must be drunk or queer in his head."

Grey drew in both oars before completing the question, "Do you know—Mrs. Grey—my wife?"

"Yes, sir, I know her well. I often sold her salmon, and saw her with you on the *Rodwell*. I humbly hope, sir, she wasn't aboard this evening?"

"You did not see her among the saved?"

"Mr. Grey, I may be mistaken——"

"Answer me, man, or——" He suddenly sprang up in the boat, and, whirling an oar in his hands, threatened the fisherman in the other boat. "Answer, man, or I'll brain you, d'ye hear? And if you tell me a lie I'll come back and brain you when I find it out. Is my wife saved?"

"I did not see her," answered the man, shoving off the wherry.

But Grey hooked the fishing-boat to the wherry with his foot, and, brandishing the oar aloft, whirled it over the head of the cowering man, and shouted out in a voice that crossed the waters and crept up the hushed shores: "Damn you, man, don't you see I mean to brain you if you won't speak?"

"She was not saved. No one on the after-deck or in the saloon was saved. It was the boilers blew up, and all aft were killed or drowned."

Grey unhooked his foot from the fishing-boat, and with his foot pushed off from her. Then throwing down the oar in the boat, he folded his arms tightly across his chest, and, still standing, drifted down the river, his large figure standing out in black against the fading purple of the west, his face turned towards the blackening east.

"Only that he lost his reason with his wife," said the fisherman, "I'd take the law of him."

"Ay," answered another man in the boat, "it's an excuse for a man to do any wild thing to lose his wife like this."

They had drifted a bit, and were now pulling back towards the spot where they had first hailed Grey.

"He's standing up still in that wherry. With a big man like him standing up in a cockleshell of a craft like that, the swell of a steamboat wouldn't think much of twisting her from under his feet," said the first speaker.

"And maybe he wouldn't much mind if it did, poor gentleman," in kindly tone, said the man whom Grey had threatened.

The wherry drifted on, but for a time Grey never altered his position. He was without his coat, without his hat; his white sleeves were rolled up above the elbows, and his powerful arms tightened across his wide chest. Gradually the boat, as it drifted, swung round, and brought his face to the fading east.

There was not a ripple on the river, not a murmur in the trees; a faint thin rustle of the water where it touched the shore was the only sound. Night was coming, with its healing dew and spacious silence for universal sleep.

Upright he stood still. The boat began to swing round once more. He did not move. Again his face was towards the darkening east.

At length the wherry gave a sudden lurch; it had encountered something, and had almost capsized.

He instinctively brought the boat on an even keel by throwing the weight of his whole body on the rising side. In a few moments the boat was still as of old. With a sudden shake and shudder he came back to a consciousness of where he was.

"That is the red No. 4 Buoy I ran foul of; it nearly capsized me," he thought.

Then shading his eyes with his open right hand, he stared back into the eastern gloom long and fixedly.

"My wife and the *Rodwell* are both gone," he whispered. "Bee and my five thousand. My wife and my five thousand pounds are gone. She brought me about five thousand when she came to me, long ago. It was to have gone to her children, if she had any, and away from me if she had none. Now she is gone, and that five thousand and another five: and I am saved! Saved!

"Saved!"

He sat down in the boat, and, keeping his legs wide apart, rested his elbows on his knees and his head on his hands. His shirt-collar was open, and yet he felt his throat tighten, and put his hand to it. When he found it free he muttered:

"It is only the hangman untying the knot; for in spirit I was a murderer. And yet I remember the day I saw her first. I can tell you all about the day I told her I loved her. I could show you the way she looked; pretty, and with her head this way. Then I knew she was mine. She was small, Bee was small; and I lifted her up and kissed her—not often, but once; once, and I felt weak for joy at that kiss; and something happened in my head or heart, and I saw all my life before me, and felt her always on my arm. And after that I was calm. It seemed we had known one another always, and had been married years.

"And I remember the first thing I said after that was not anything wild or romantic; it was:

"'In the back of the Bank-house there is a bay-window like this, but there are creepers on it.' And she asked me what kind the creepers were; and I laughed and said I did not know. 'But,' I said, a kind of foolish pun, 'my Bee shall come and tell me, won't she?' And Bee said, 'Maybe so.'

"And I remember when I bought the engaged ring, and how she kissed me then the first time of her own accord.

"And I remember how when we were married first she clung to me, and seemed to grudge her eyes for anything but me. And I remember how I used to walk around her and about her through the streets, if anything seemed to threaten her with disturbance—a dog, or a draught, or a cab, or a——"

"He suddenly threw up his face to the deep purple sky, and cried out, in a hoarse whisper:

"And to-night, by God, I am not man enough to weep that she is dead! I am not man enough to wish her back again!"

He looked around the water, as though he expected to see some form of temporal or eternal vengeance approaching him.

As his eyes fell upon the water, something came very slowly floating towards him. Something which was almost wholly submerged, and, owing to that fact, drifted more quickly than the boat. As the thing drew nearer it gradually settled down in the water, and, before he could touch it, sank.

"It looked like a cloak," he whispered. "What have I been doing here? I must get ashore, and see if the——" He could not bring himself to say "body," and without thought sat down, and began rowing rapidly towards Asherton's Quay.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FUTURE AS IT SEEMED.

When Grey's boat came alongside the little quay he jumped out, and went hastily to a crowd of people assembled round the bodies and wreckage landed already.

His manner was highly excited, and the questions put by him came in such an incoherent torrent the people did not know where to begin the answers.

Some of the survivors, some of those who had been on the fore-deck, stood near: these he asked if they knew Mrs. Grey.

Yes, some of them knew Mrs. Grey.

Had they seen her either before or after the boat went down? Did they see her go aboard? She was to have been on board, and he was to have gone too, but he had been called away. Then he was to have joined the steamer off the Island; but she slipped him by, and he was not able to go on board. Could it be possible no one had seen his wife, Mrs. Grey? Could no one give him any tale or tidings of his wife?

No. No one could tell him anything about her. No one had seen her; but then that was not to be wondered at, for all the people who survived had been on the fore-deck, and from the fore-deck it was impossible, or nearly impossible, to see the people on the after-deck.

But surely some of those who had been saved knew whether his wife had or had not gone on board at Daneford? That was simple enough.

They could not say; they only knew they had neither seen her nor heard of her that evening on the *Rodwell*, or in connection with the *Rodwell*.

Among that sad group on the shore, Grey was the first who came enquiring for friend or relative, and those who knew him pitied him with all their hearts; for they recollected his marriage had been the result of a love-match, and that he was reputed to be the kindest, most generous, and most loyal husband in the city. His constant good-humour and kindly actions, his generosity, and his great importance and usefulness to the people of Daneford, added in no slight way to increase the sympathy and respect of those who stood on the little quay that night and heard his excited questions, and answered him back gently and with tears in their hearts.

For his own part he had not yet been able to bring the results of the disaster sharply before his mind. The fact that the disaster had occurred was never clearly with his apprehension. As soon as he removed his eyes from the salvage and the dead, and looked out upon the broad peaceful river, it seemed impossible that at the very spot he had recently rowed over scores of people lay dead, and among the dead his wife.

The news of the catastrophe spread quickly, and gradually the crowd gathered and swelled. From the neighbourhood, some who had friends in the unlucky boat came, and found their friends alive in houses around the landing-place. Others found friends or relatives beneath the cloths which had been spread over the dead. Others were in a condition similar to Grey: could find no trace of those whom they supposed to be in the boat at the time she blew up.

Among the last-named searchers was a man who lived on the banks of the river, and had heard the explosion and hastened to the spot. He had reason to fear his only son had been in the boat,

but he could not to be certain, as the young man lived at Daneford, and often, though not invariably, took the boat on a Friday evening. The father was distracted, and at last came to Grey, whom he knew slightly, and, under the impression that the banker had been a passenger, asked for tidings of his son.

After a few half-incoherent replies from Grey, the father gathered the facts of the latter's case, and found they were both circumstanced in the same way. For a moment the old man felt utterly helpless and desperate. Then his mind seemed to clear up suddenly, and, turning to Grey, he said:

"Neither of us is sure he is a sufferer by this awful calamity, nor can we be certain as long as we stay here unless our worst fears come true." He pointed to the river and shuddered. "They have already begun dragging, but it will be days before all are found, if all are ever found. Each of us may hope still. Suppose, instead of this sickening waiting here, we drive back to the city? There we may find those whom we fear to find here. Is not that better than watching each boat, and bending over each poor body that is landed?"

"You are right!" cried Grey eagerly, all his faculties suddenly starting into life, and his mind for the first time seizing upon the idea of getting certain knowledge speedily. The torpor which had fallen upon his intellectual faculties at the moment of the explosion left him, and he not only warmly seconded the old man's plan, but before the other could speak, had secured and was seated in one of the many flys which had already begun to arrive with helpers and friends at the scene of the wreck.

In a few seconds the fly was spinning along in the direction of Daneford. Both the men in the vehicle were too much occupied with their own concerns for conversation. Grey's thoughts ran on:

"She is dead. Beyond all doubt she is dead. Poor Bee! poor Bee! I wonder did she think of me with her last thought. I wonder was she glad or sorry to go. And now that she is gone, my poor Bee, I don't know how I feel.

"Poor Bee, I shall miss her. I have been unkind and unjust to her. I have treated her cruelly, cruelly. My being unkind and scornful to her did no one any good. It hurt her, and it hurt me. Poor thing!

"The house will be strange now. The rooms where she has been will feel so quiet, so useless. What is a house for but a woman? A man does not want a house of many rooms. Least of all does he want a house of many rooms haunted by a memory. A man wants only two rooms, one to eat in and one to sleep in. When a childless man's wife dies he ought to give up housekeeping. What is the use of hollow rooms all round a man's head? They are only chilling storehouses of recollection."

Here his mind halted a long time. When he resumed at the point where he had left off, he added but one more thought:

"I'll sell the Manor."

He paused much longer, said to himself, as though he were familiarising himself with the whole situation by repeating the words forming the key to it:

"I'll sell the Manor."

After going over the words so often that they began to lose their meaning, he started suddenly:

"No. I cannot sell the Manor. I cannot sell the Manor House. A man in my position must have a house. A man in my position——

"My position! My position! My position!

"Curse it, why can't I keep my head clear? I am not going mad, I should hope. What an amusing maniac I should make just now! The people would gather from all sides to hear honest Wat raving about stealing the property of the baronet. It would be town talk. Never was mad-mad so mad, they would say. But let me get on——

"Of course a man in my position ought to have a house. I must have a place to see my friends in. I must entertain a little and——"

His thoughts paused again a while, and then he abandoned thinking on the line he had been following with the mental exclamation: "No, no! I must not think of that now. I must not think of that—over the open grave of poor Bee!"

He shook himself and endeavoured to fix his mind on matters of the hour, and to keep it free of the future:

"How the purely business aspect of things has altered within these awful twenty-four hours! Sir Alexander has become powerless to alter that will, and still lives. The longer he lives now, the better for me. While he retained his faculties there was always great danger he might make some change. Now there is no longer any fear of that.

"What a terrible scene that was at the bedside! If I had known anything of the kind was about to occur, I don't think I should have had the courage to face it. I fear I would have gone the fatal

length before I would have knowingly encountered it. It was so awful to hold her hand and swear such things in the face of the facts. But it is all over, and I am well out of it. Perhaps, after all, it is better the scene should have taken place.

"I suppose I shall be much at the Castle now. In fact, I don't know who is to give any orders now if I do not. It will be all thrown on me, I can plainly see that. Often at the Castle means meeting her often, and meeting her often means that we shall be good friends.

"How long did we stand hand-in-hand this evening? Not long. I did not note her beauty then, but now I can call back the face and change the surroundings——

"No, no! I must not sell the Manor. A man in my position must have a house for—I may marry again."

He set his teeth and clenched his hands, and drove the nails of his fingers into his palms. Then he faced the position resolutely:

"A while ago I shirked looking into the future across an open grave. But my own grave is open too. Can I fill it up? I think I can. Self-preservation is the first law. I cannot get back my five thousand pounds from the *Rodwell*. I cannot get back my wife from the Weeslade: can I get back my life? That is the question of questions, and it is idle out of feeble sentimentalism to defer looking at such grave business in a straightforward and candid way.

"I must marry, and I must marry this girl. Nothing else can save me, and I think nothing can prevent my doing it. I hold the winning cards in my hand at last, and I mean to win."

The old gentleman here broke in upon the banker's reverie with: "We are passing your house, Mr. Grey."

"Ah, so we are; thank you. Drop me here; I'll walk up, and you take the fly on. I hope you will find your son all safe."

"God grant it! I hope you will find your wife at the house."

"Thank you; good-night."

"Good-night."

Grey turned into the Park, and walked slowly in the direction of his house.

Twice he paused and faced round, as though the place were new to him, and he wished to fix indelibly on his memory what could be seen in the dim light. Or was it that he now looked at the Park in a new aspect, from a new standpoint? Or was it that he wanted to gain time and composure before reaching the house? He could not have told himself why he stopped, in fact he was perfectly unconscious of having ceased to move forward; and although his eyes passed deliberately from tree to tree, and seemed to be dissatisfied with the want of light, he was not aware his thought was occupied with the scene. The pause in his walk indicated merely a pause in his thought. While he moved towards the house he had but one idea.

"I must marry, and I must marry this girl. Nothing else can save me."

With this thought beating through his brain he shook himself, straightened his figure, and collected his faculties for meeting the servants and formally ascertaining his wife had left the house and taken passage in the ill-fated *Rodwell*.

With a steady stride, and head erect, he walked up to the front door and into the hall.

He looked round hastily, and then asked:

"James, where is your mistress?"

The man blinked in surprise at seeing his master and being asked such a question. Mrs. Grey had told the servants that morning she and Mr. Grey were going to Seacliff that evening, and now here was his master come back alone, and asking in a startling manner where the mistress was. He had better be guarded in his reply. "I don't know, sir," was his answer.

"Is she in the house, James?"

"No, sir."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Quite sure."

"When did she go out?"

"I did not see her go out, sir; but at luncheon she said she was going out, and I have not seen her since."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"Yes, sir. She said if anyone called I was to tell them she had gone to Seacliff with you this evening."

"Are you quite sure of all this?"

"Quite sure, sir. The cook was in the dining-room at the time, and heard the mistress tell me. Mistress had the cook up to give her orders about to-morrow."

"James, you will never see your poor mistress again. The *Rodwell* blew up, and she was not among the saved."

"Good God!" exclaimed the old soldier, starting back and involuntarily bringing his hand to his forehead, as though he found himself thrust into the presence of the general of the enemy. He fell back two paces, and, dropping his hand to his mouth, uttered a sob. "Good God!" exclaimed the near-sighted servant, whose heart was full of dumb gratitude and desolate sense of loss. "The last words she said to me were, 'Thank you for the flowers, James; I know it was you put them fresh in the vases. Thank you, James.' That's what she said to me as she went down the passage to her own room. When she was in the passage she turned back, and said so that I shouldn't forget it, 'Thank you, James; and recollect if anyone calls I'll be back to-morrow.' And now to think that she is dead!" He had forgotten the presence of his master, who stood irresolute a moment, and then with a heavy sigh walked into the inner hall and disappeared up the gloomy unlit staircase.

Neither master nor mistress having been expected home, there was no light in any of the rooms or passages on the first floor. With heavy slow step Mr. Grey proceeded to his own bedroom and lit the gas.

How cold and dreary and desolate it looked!

He poured out some water and bathed his face. This revived and invigorated him. Then he rang the bell. The chambermaid answered it.

"Jane, I suppose you have heard the awful news from James?"

"Yes, sir." The girl burst out crying.

"Do you know the exact time at which your poor mistress left the house for the boat?"

"No, sir. None of us saw her go; but none of us were in the front of the house after luncheon. We dined at three, just after the mistress had her luncheon; and we all think she must have gone out while we were sitting down."

"That will do, Jane, thank you."

"Thank you, sir; and if you please, sir, we're all very sorry for her and for you," crying. "She was a good kind mistress, and never took any of us up short, or refused us anything in reason."

"She was a good kind mistress, Jane. I am very much obliged to you and to them. Tell all of them below that."

The girl withdrew, weeping bitterly.

Once more he was alone.

Until now there had lingered in his mind a haunting doubt. He could not believe the evidence before him. Now all was simple and intelligible.

He commenced to pace the room. At first his step was firm and slow. He was weighing mighty thoughts.

Gradually the past seemed to fall from him like a cope of lead. He folded his arms on his breast. He threw up his head into the air, as in fancy he stepped across the threshold of his new life. The colour came into his cheeks and the sparkle into his eye. He strode beneath triumphal arches, and heard the shouts of surging multitudes in his ears.

Yes, the past was now vanished into the darkness, which need never again be explored, be visited, be contemplated. Let the past bury its dead. Let him look at the future.

It was brighter now than ever. The position of the Bank was secure above all chances of assault. He should marry that girl, and by that marriage cover up for ever the crime he had committed. The reputation of her fortune would enormously increase the security and business of the Bank.

Then—long-deferred ambition—then he might enter Parliament. The best society would gradually open to him. He should be successful in the House; he should possibly rise to place; if this happened, considering he should have the reputation of great wealth, and for a wife the beautiful daughter of a baronet, of a race that went back to the Conquest, what more possible than that there should in a few years, in Debrett, be the name of Sir Henry Walter Grey, Bart.?

The prospect was not unreasonable. What intoxicating probabilities were these!

He would like a little brandy now. He did not care to go downstairs for it, or to ring again. There was some, no doubt, in the tower cupboard. Yes, that would do. Here was the key in his pocket.

With a radiant face and an elastic step he left the room, carrying a lighted candle in his hand.

He stalked back in a few minutes, holding the candle out at arm's length before him.

"The other key is at the other side of the door. The door is locked on the inner side, and my wife is there!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PRESENT AS IT WAS.

He put the candle on the dressing-table, and sat down in front of the glass. He placed one elbow on the table, bent his head low, and catching his hair, softly rested his head on the ball of his hand.

His brows were knit. His eyes, bent on the toilet-cover, were vacant, rayless; they carefully explored the pattern of the cloth. His mind was a blank. It showed nothing. It was as incapable of reflection as the waters of the middle sea battered by the winds beneath the tawny clouds. His reason was not with him, and the machinery of his mind had stopped. There were no ideas in his imagination. His mind floated free in unoccupied space.

For a while he sat thus. Then he raised his head and looked firmly into the glass.

"What has happened to me?" he thought, with his eyes fixed on the eyes in the glass. "A moment ago, when I discovered she still lived, I felt in despair; and now I am calm. What has happened to me?

"What has happened to me?

"Here is the situation:

"The servants think she went to that boat. She knew on such occasions I always took charge of whatever little luggage we required. They have not seen her since luncheon. They believe she was in the *Rodwell*. It is scarcely possible anyone can say she was not in the *Rodwell*; all the people and crew who were on the after-deck are dead. Any one who heard of my visit to Asherton's Quay, or met one of the servants, would regard me as a widower. I *was* a widower at Asherton's Quay. I *was* a widower while I drove up from Asherton's Quay to this. My servants assure me I am a widower.

"To-morrow all Daneford will regard me a widower.

"To-morrow morning Maud Midharst will think of me as a widower—Maud Midharst, who will one day own that chest, which, when opened, will be found to contain the bones of a thief and a suicide, not the fortune of a great heiress.

"To-morrow morning Maud Midharst will think of me as a widower; *what will she think of me as—at night*?"

Suddenly the fixed expression left his face. A thought that sent the blood tingling through his veins had rushed in upon him.

"Perhaps," he said, breathless, "I am a widower! She may be dead!"

He rose nimbly, and, taking up the candle, once more went into the passage leading to the first-floor room of the Tower of Silence.

He looked carefully round, and then going to the end of the passage further from the tower, closed the two doors and locked the inner one.

He proceeded cautiously back to the door leading into the tower. This was a single door. He held the candle in his left hand, knocked with his right, and bent his ear towards the door.

No reply.

He knocked again, this time more loudly.

Still no reply.

Holding the candle behind him, he bent low and looked into the keyhole.

Undoubtedly there was the end of the shaft of the key shining against his eye.

He paused a while in deep thought; then shaking himself up, knocked more loudly, battering with his clenched fist.

No answer.

He looked at the candle he carried. It was wax, and in his moving to and fro the wax had overflowed the flame-pan and run down the side, making a long thin ridge. He took a piece of pencil from his pocket, stripped off the ridge of wax, softened the wax at the flame, and stuck a lump the size of a pea on the end of the pencil.

Then he heated the free end of the wax, and when it had just begun to run thrust it cautiously into the keyhole, and pressed the wax against the shaft of the key in the lock. He held the pencil steadily thus for a few minutes. With great caution he tried it. All was well. The wax adhered firmly to the end of the pencil and the shaft of the key.

With elaborate care he twisted the pencil slightly one way, then the other. The key moved slowly

in the lock. He tried it four or five times right and left, and holding the candle behind him and his eye on a level with the keyhole. At last the hole was completely blocked up by the body of the key. Forcing the pencil in firmly, the key slipped through the hole and fell on the floor within.

He straightened himself, leaned against the wall for a moment, and wiped his forehead. Then drawing his keys out of his pocket, he inserted one in the lock, turned the lock softly, and entered.

As he did so the head of a man disappeared below the window-sill. Grey did not see this head, nor did he at that time know of the man's presence.

The room was one of medium size, but it was dark in colour, and the one candle was almost lost in it, and revealed little or nothing.

Holding the light above his head Grey peered around.

He approached a couch, on which could be dimly seen the prostrate figure of a woman. The figure did not move as he drew near.

He stood over the couch and looked down upon his wife. She was lying on her back. Her mouth was slightly open, and her face very pale. Her eyes, too, were partly open.

He waved the candle across the eyes. No sign of consciousness. He called "Bee" softly two or three times. No answer.

Could it be she was really dead? Really dead after all?

He stooped down and put his ear over her mouth.

No, this was not death. This was—brandy.

He shook her slightly. He caught her by the shoulder and shook her more strongly, calling her name into her ear.

She responded by neither sound nor motion.

Then putting the candle down on the floor he stood up, folded his arms, and reflected intently with his eyes fixed on her.

Not death but brandy, and yet how like death, and how near death! How near death! And still in the interval between this and death lay his ruin, his destruction. A blanket thrown on that face would bridge over the interval between this state and death, and give him a golden road to happiness and glorious prosperity.

His wife! This his wife here, degraded thus! This woman whom he had loved with all the love he had ever given woman! This woman, whom he had married in defiance of his father's wish and all worldly wisdom! Great God, was this to be borne?

She had brought herself nigh death. She was nigh death now. It might be she would never awake. It was quite possible she might never awake. But then the hideous scandal! The coroner's jury found that Mrs. Grey, wife of Henry Walter Grey, Esq., died of excessive drink! Intolerable!

And yet this wretched woman lying here had made such a thing not only possible but probable. Suppose she should never wake, what an unendurable position for him! He could not live through that odious inquest, never survive that degrading verdict. He should throw himself into the Weeslade, or blow out his brains first.

Any time she might get into such a condition and never awake! Great God! this was a view of the case he had never taken until now. He had always had the dread of disclosure before his mind, but now he should have the infinitely more appalling horrors of a coroner's jury and a coroner's verdict. This was insupportable. Abominable!

Any time in the future she might die as she was now. Then no doubt he should be a widower, but a widower under what a terrible shadow! Suppose she should die now, and by any means it should come out that he had deliberately placed the brandy in her way, he had better leave Daneford at once. They would look on him as a murderer.

As a murderer!

They would *know* he had put a fatal temptation in his wife's path. The discovery was what he dreaded.

Suppose she never woke again—ah!

Suppose she never got up alive off that couch!

Never got up from where she lay!

That was a royal thought? Now to make all right, all secure. Now! What a royal thought! A thought worthy of the prince regnant of the Nether Depths.

He stooped, took up his candle, and crossed the room with rapid steps. He locked the door of the tower-room, and, having reached his own room, rang the bell.

James answered the bell.

"James," he said, "I cannot rest. I cannot believe this dreadful thing. I wish you and the other servants to search the house thoroughly from garret to cellars. Mind, a room is not to be omitted. When every room has been examined let me know. I have been in the tower."

James left, and for an hour the banker sat alone in his bedroom. At the end of the hour James came back with the report that every room had been examined and no trace found.

"We can do no more, James. I shall want no one to-night. You may all go to bed as soon as you like. Good-night."

Again he was alone. Alone for the night. Alone save for the proximity of his wife in the next room. Alone with his royal idea and the easy means of carrying it out.

He braced himself, and began walking up and down the room firmly.

Yes, this was a golden opportunity, which would have been utterly worthless but that in the mid-centre and at the right moment his great thought had burst in upon him.

It was most likely his wife would never wake. In fact, the chances were in favour of her not waking. It would be almost a miracle if ever she returned to consciousness.

Why should there ever be an inquest?

Supposing she had died in her sleep, it would have done no one any good to hold an inquest.

Then, if she did die in this sleep, what would Maud Midharst regard him as to-morrow night?

As a widower, of course.

And what should he regard himself as?

As a man doubly delivered from a wife who was the slave of an odious vice, and from ruin, disgrace, and suicide.

She was sleeping still, he supposed. He would go and try.

He stole cautiously out into the passage, and, opening the door into the tower-room, crept towards the couch. He did not carry a candle this time. He stumbled over something hard and metallic which he had seen when last in the room. He recovered himself rapidly. He paused, balanced himself on the balls of his feet, leaned forward, and listened intently.

The sound had not roused her.

It was as dark as a vault. A faint blue square, like the bloom under trees in summer, showed the situation of the one window. All the rest was as much out of view as if the solid earth intervened.

He crossed the room and approached the couch, with his head thrust forward, and all the faculties of his mind bent on his hearing; he stooped over the couch and listened, as though he would pierce remotest silence to reach what he sought.

Yes, there was a low, faint sound of breathing, but so low it seemed to come from a long distance.

He knelt down beside the couch, and called softly in her ear, "Bee."

No answer.

"Bee."

No answer.

"Bee."

No answer.

A long pause followed, during which no sound stirred in the intense darkness. The husband still leant over the wife, the wife still breathed faintly.

Then——

In ten minutes from that strange sound Grey was back in his bedroom, standing before the glass with set resolute lips and a rigid white face.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ASCENT OF THE TOWER OF SILENCE.

"There need be no inquest," he thought. "There need be no inquest *now*. To-morrow morning every one in Daneford will believe that she is dead, and every one will be—right. Her name will be included in the list of the dead, there will be a reference to my broken-hearted behaviour at Asherton's Quay, and there will be expressions of sympathy with me.

"I shall wear mourning.

"What o'clock is it?" He looked at his watch. "Too soon yet. I must wait until all are asleep.

"I shall wear mourning and receive the condolences of my friends. I shall pass through avenues of faces cast in sorrow for my grief. They will hush their voice when I enter the Daneford Bank. They will unanimously vote resolutions of sympathy at most of the public bodies to which I belong. And I—I—how shall I receive their greetings?

"How shall I receive them? Shall I quail and tremble and jabber of to-night's work? Shall I become hysterical or gloomy? No, no, no. I shall be as bold at least as the thief whom they crucified on the Left Hand.

"The oath I took by that bedside this evening was my swearing into the army of the everlasting damned, and no one shall ever say I quailed or I faltered.

"What o'clock is it? Yet too soon. This is all I need be careful about. Once it is there, I shall be free and blithe—free and blithe!

"I shall meet them all and never show a sign. It is a pity I did not go on the stage. I feel quite confident I can play out this part to the end, and carry my audience with me so thoroughly that not one of them will know I am playing a part. No living man shall find out I do not speak my own words. It is only comrade Judas and his friends know who the real author of the play is."

He turned away from the glass and began pacing the room quickly. He was thinking with fierce pride of the brave front he should show to the world, and motion stimulated his mind and gave reality to his mental action.

Yes, he should never waver. In fact he felt stronger now than before. He had lived under the shadow of her fault; now he faced his own crime. All depended on himself, and he knew he was equal to the situation and its contingencies.

He could face them all. All the people of Daneford and Seacliff. Every one of——

He shivered, drew his body together, and leaned for a moment against the wall. The cold sweat oozed from his white forehead, and he gasped for breath. In a while he shook himself, threw up his arms, and wound them round his head, as if to protect himself against the blows of a merciless enemy, and moaned out, in a tone of craven misery:

"No, no! Not you? Go away! I cannot look at you; you must not come near me. I have ceased to be your son. I am not the child you suckled. I am not the son you taught to pray. I am not the man you inspired with respect and love. I am not the son you always tried to make do his duty. Mother, let me call you mother darling once again; to call you my angel, mother, seems to purge me of my crime. I am a strong man, mother, but I cannot look at you. Bee is dead, and I have killed her. Now, will you not fly from me? Think of your son as dead, and fly this murderer. What! you will not! You see the brand of Cain, and you will not go! Oh, invincible love! Intolerable devotion! Supreme disciple of Christ, you drive me mad. I am mad already. Go, woman; go, woman, or I may kill you too."

He dropped his arms from his head, and glared round the room with the fire of madness in his eyes. The neck-ribbon his wife had worn last night at dinner hung on the glass; a pair of her slippers, soft slippers for comfort, were under the dressing-table. His eyes lighted on the ribbon, then on the slippers.

With an idiotic laugh he staggered across the room, and, sitting down on the side of the bed, remained in a torpor for a long time. The last vision conjured up by him had stunned his imagination and baffled his intellect, and his mind, while he sat thus, was blank as the viewless wind.

It was a long time before he roused himself, and even then he had to employ considerable effort to bring himself up to the point of action. He knew he had yet something of the last importance to do. He looked at his watch.

"Eleven. All is quiet. I may safely go now."

He arose, and, taking the candle with him, walked heavily into the passage, and having opened the other door passed into the tower-room, and locked the door of that room, leaving his own key in the lock.

Remembering the second key, he lowered the candle and looked for it on the dark oak floor. He saw it and picked it up. As he did so his eyes caught another metallic glitter on the floor, and stepping towards it he took up something.

Holding the metallic object next the light, he seemed for a moment perplexed.

"What brings a burglar's jemmy here? How can it have come here?"

He looked very cautiously and slowly round the room.

"I did not notice until now," he thought, "those open drawers. Why, the place has been broken into."

His first impulse was to rush to the window. But he curbed that. It would be just as well not to be

seen at that window now. Suppose by any chance the burglar happened to be lurking in the neighbourhood, in the Park. No part of the house or grounds commanded this room, and so long as he did not go near the window all would be well.

He had stumbled over that jemmy before—before he had added to the perfidy of Judas the sin of Cain.

He approached the couch. All was quiet there. Not a sound, not a breath.

He went still nearer. Now for the first time he noticed close by the couch an empty decanter, the one into which James had poured brandy, and by it a glass.

He noticed something else too; the left hand of the figure on the couch lay on the breast, and from the third finger all the rings were gone.

"All the rings gone!" he thought, in dismay. "The place broken into and all the rings gone! This room broken into and the rings taken off the finger! She never removed the wedding-ring, and scarcely ever the guard. She must have been asleep when he came in; and he, no doubt, seeing the decanter and the glass, and observing she took no notice of sounds, went about his work. A bold man, a very bold man."

When had that man been there? He had no means of determining the time at which the burglar had been in the room. It was clear, however, he had been there while she was alive.

Had he been there after the sailing of the steamboat *Rodwell* from Daneford that evening? If so, that burglar could hang him, Grey.

Out with the candle.

He extinguished it.

A profound quiet brooded abroad. Not a leaf stirred. The trees were as motionless and the air as mute as if the air was solid crystal. No sound from the city or the road intruded upon the voiceless darkness of that tower-room.

Grey stood a while looking at the square of dim blue bloom indicating where the window was. Then he stooped and touched what lay on the couch, and pulled himself upright with a jerk.

He stooped down his head once more, and listened intently. Last time he had so stooped he had heard a low faint breathing. Now nothing reached his ears, but beyond the reach of human ears he heard the deep roll of the Eternal Ocean on the shores of Everlasting Night.

The ocean of everlasting silence, where her voice had been, was more awful than the clangour of war, or the shouts of a burning town.

"It will not do to think now. I must make thought drunk with action. She is not heavy. I have often carri——No, no; that sort of thing would be the worst of all. Now for it!"

He stooped once again, rose more slowly than at any former time, and walked down the room with heavy footfall, carrying a burden.

The room had two doors—one between it and the passage leading to the bedroom; the other between it and the landing of the tower-stairs.

The staircase down from the landing was boarded off, so that egress from the tower-room by that staircase was impossible.

The upward way was unimpeded. The staircase had not been used once for years. There was nothing in either of the upper rooms, and no one had ever been in either of them since Grey himself, when he had gone over the house before buying it.

The staircase was as dark and silent as a grave. A thin carpet of dust deadened the footfalls, and, clinging to the boot-leather, muffled the feet. Now and then his foot crushed a small piece of plaster which had fallen from the ceiling. This made a sound like a wild beast crunching bones.

The paper had parted from the walls in many places, and hung in damp festoons from the ceiling here and there.

Now and then long slimy arms of paper stretched out to him from the walls and held him back. This made him stagger against the balustrade to steady himself. The balustrade upon which he laid his hand was rickety, and covered with a damp spongy dust, that clung to his hand and worked up between his moist fingers, and stuck his fingers together as with blood. When he had got clear of the paper that, hanging from the walls, had seized him, and had pushed himself away from the slimy balustrade, he toiled upward.

But the day had been a terribly exhausting one, and his progress was very slow.

He held his burden with his right arm on his right shoulder, and steadied himself against the wall with his right elbow, against the balustrade with his left hand.

Owing to the inviolate darkness and his small acquaintance with the way, he was obliged to feel carefully with his foot each step before advancing.

He gained the first landing. The darkness was so complete, it pressed with weight upon his

eyeballs, and thickened the air in his lungs. He had already begun to breathe heavily, and he paused for breath. Only about a sixth of his upward way had been accomplished, and yet he felt fatigued. The stifling sultry air of the tower made him languid and drowsy.

The sooner this was done, the better.

He recommenced the ascent.

On reaching the next landing, that of the second-floor room, he paused again.

His breathing had by this time become more laboured, and he felt as if his chest would burst. No fresh air had entered that loathsome place for years. In winter the walls wept, the paper hung off, and fungus covered the walls and the woodwork.

In summer the walls dried up, and from the dead fungi rose the stifling vapours exhaled when decay feeds on decay. These odious vapours enriched the walls with new growing powers, and so the process went on. The tower rotted inwardly. Damp came first, and later mildew, and then fungus. The fungus lived its life and finally fell to pieces, yielding inodorous fibre and mephitic spirit. The spirit fed the later growth of fungus.

Here nitre clung in crystals to the walls, and there were incomplete stalagmites under the stone window-sills.

Huge spiders wove gigantic nets from balustrade to wall, from roof to wall, from window-sash to floor. But no flies ever came to these webs, and the spiders spread needless snares, and lived at ease on lesser game.

In summer all the dust upon the floor moved continually with worm and maggot of extraordinary size, and obscene ugliness of form and colour. Neither beetle nor cockroach, earwig nor cricket, found a home here. Nothing moved swiftly, not even the spider, for he found food without pursuit or strife. Here was no contention among individuals. As in all earliest forms of life, nearly everything was done for the individual by heat and moisture. The unseemly inside of that tower was fretting and rotting slowly away, being slowly devoured by the worm and the maggot and the fungus.

Through the warm vapours of that polluted tower the man staggered upward. His breathing had now become stertorous, and beat in the hollow staircase and against the sounding boards furnished by the empty rooms like the snorting of a hunted monster.

The air grew thicker in his lungs, and his heart tingled and throbbed as though it would burst. The arteries in his neck appeared at each beat of his pulse about to jump from their places. His gullet was dry, and the air rushing through his windpipe seemed burdened with sand that tore the skin of his parched throat. The arteries in his temple twanged against the bone with noises that made him giddy. The uproar of strangulation was in his head. His knees were sinking under him, and he felt he should faint or fall down in a fit if he did not do something.

He resolved to shift his burden from the right shoulder to the left.

How heavy! Ugh!

Cold already!

Oh, great God! the lips had touched his forehead, and they were cold! The lips he had a thousand times——

With a howl that made the hollow chambers and the invisible staircase shake, he clasped his burden to his left shoulder and dashed wildly up the stairs.

Now he ran against the wall in front, now against the balustrade. He took a step too many, and plunged headforemost against the wall. He took a step too few, and fell headlong upon a landing.

What was all that to him now? What was all that to him, who had loved her once, her whose cold lips—cold of his own chilling—had touched his forehead as he shifted his murdered darling from one shoulder to another?

Oh, God! the lips he had lingered on lovingly long ago! The lips he had sought with all his soul and won to his own exclusive use! How often had they told his name! How often had they told her love to him, when all else in the world sank into nothingness compared with the august privilege of knowing she loved him! How often when she slept had he heard those lips breathe his name with terms of endearment! And now, oh God!

On! On! There is a clamour of memories worse than demons at his back.

On! Out of this place! Away from these memories!

The roof at last!

The roof, with cool air and a wide view, and—This!

He placed his burden softly on the roof of the tower; then throwing himself down at full length, rolled over on his face, and, putting one forearm under the other, rested his forehead on the upper arm, and, excepting the heavy heaving of his chest, lay still.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON THE TOP.

The top of the tower was flat. It was reached through a hooded doorway resembling a ship's companion. A parapet about two and a half feet high ran round the tower on all sides, and in the left-hand angle of the parapet, looking towards the grounds in front of the house, stood the tall, battered, dilapidated, rusted tank.

This tank had been of substantial make. Four upright bars of iron still stood showing where the four angles of the elevation of the tank had been. Binding the top of these four uprights together had been a substantial rail. The inner side of that rail had disappeared; the three other sides remained. Half-way down the uprights had been four girders binding the uprights together. Of these girders three were entire, the one on the outside having succumbed to violence of time. A few of the plates clung to the uprights in the upper section of the tank. In the lower section only one plate was missing, and that on the back of the tank. The base of the tank was eight feet square, the height of the uprights ten feet. Once in it had been stored the water-supply. More than fifty years ago it had been superseded by a tank put up in the main building. Since then not a dozen times had any one visited the top of the tower.

That night of the 17th of August was dark; there were neither stars nor moon. No wind had arisen to disturb the intense calm.

At length Grey rose from the ground somewhat refreshed and quieted. There was no use in being foolhardy, and although a person standing on the avenue below could not possibly see a human figure on the top of the tower, still all means caution could suggest ought to be employed. So he stepped into the dilapidated tank through the opening, and having, except on the inner side, a complete bulwark around him five feet high, there was no chance of any one seeing him. He did not care to face yet the descent through that stifling tower.

He would wait a while until he should be fully restored.

He had eaten nothing since luncheon, and the physical and mental ordeals through which he had since passed reduced the activity of his mind, and made his thoughts move slowly, and dimmed the ideas in his imagination. Still in a dull way he sought to review his position.

There to the right lay Daneford, his town, the city of which he was dictator, which would do anything, everything he asked. You could not see the city from this, but there it reposed under that red-yellow stain upon the sky.

The people of that town, if they had seen him take that old man's gold, would not have believed the evidence of their senses. They would have placed their opinion of him against the evidence of their eyes, and his reputation would turn the balance as though nothing was in the other scale. He was sure of that.

To the left was the Island. The old man probably still lived and would live for some time, but the will was now safe. Maud was still unmarried, and he—was free! Free in a double sense: free to marry again, and free from the clutches of the law—so far.

In front of him lay the Manor Park with its stifling groves and alleys, whose lush, rank vegetation and loathsome reptiles and insects kept curious boy and prying man at bay.

By his side stood the Manor House, upon which no green thing would grow, and which had an evil name.

Beneath him was that repulsive tower, up which no one would care to go except upon dire compulsion.

Behind him——

Yes, behind him lay—It.

The question was, Would his reputation in the town, the fact that by noon to-morrow everyone in Daneford would believe he had lost his wife in the *Rodwell*, the unpopular Park, the uncanny house, the foul tower, the parapet, the remains of this tank (perfect five feet from the roof, except for one eighteen-inch plate, which, owing to its position at the back, could not be even missed from any standpoint but the top of the tower itself), keep It from discovery? be an effectual and life-long barrier between detection and crime, so that he might marry and live once more in——? Well, never mind in what. Anyway, might live?

It was a long question. He put it to himself many times, and could arrive at no answer. His reason answered Yes. His imagination answered No; and according as his reason or his imagination dominated he hoped or he despaired.

The hours advanced. It would be well to get this all over and go down. He had locked the door on the passage, and there was no need for fear or hurry. But staying here did no good, and he had now sufficiently recovered to go down.

He stepped out of the tank and approached the burden.

He raised it, and bending low carried it to the tank. There was difficulty in getting it through the narrow opening, but at last all was accomplished.

He stepped out of the tank, and stood on the open part of the top of the tower for a few moments to recover his breath.

"Hah! I am all right now. I shall grope my way down very well; it will not take half so long to go down as it did to come up."

He placed his hand on the hood of the doorway and stooped to descend; he paused and drew back, thinking:

"If I have killed her, that is no reason why I should add brutality to crime. I did not cover her face, and the birds might——"

He crept back to the tank, leaving the thought unfinished.

He entered it and stooped.

All at once something happened in his mind. Just as he stooped to cover the face of his dead wife, he fell upon his knees beside her, and cried out:

"Almighty God, I have killed her. Almighty God, be merciful if Thou wilt, and let me die."

Burying his face in his hands he burst into hysterical sobs that shook him and would not be uttered without racking pains. They were too big for his chest, too big for his throat, too big for his mouth. While a sob was bursting from his labouring chest he felt the weight of ten thousand atmospheres pressing down his throat. When the sob burst forth, he shuddered and shivered and winced as if a scourge wielded by a powerful arm had fallen on his naked shoulders.

The violence of this outburst had one alleviating effect: while it racked the physical it annihilated the mental man. He was sobbing because he knew he had most excellent cause for inarticulable sorrow. But the sorrow itself made no image in his mind. It was with him as with the player of an instrument, who, coming upon a well-known passage of great mechanical difficulty, finds when the passage is passed small memory of the music and strong memory of each flexion of the fingers, but can, when he needs it, hear all the passage again note for note as it had flown from beneath his fingers.

The wife of his middle life had been murdered by some one long ago. He thought nothing of that. But now he was kneeling by the corpse of the wife of his youth, the bride-sweetheart of his stronger years.

All the trouble, all the cark, all the memory of her faults, of her odd ways, were gone. He was not the middle-aged husband penitent by the body of the middle-aged wife he had murdered. He was the young enthusiastic husband-lover by the side of his dead young wife.

He had not killed the Beatrice he had married long ago. But, O woe, woe, incommunicable agony, he had slain all the faults of his middle-aged wife, he had slain all the years of his life during which his indifference had sprouted and blossomed, and was now by the side of the woman dead whose existence had been to him the sunshine and the rapture of his life.

In a moment of madness he had sought to kill a faulty wife, but by terrible decrees of Heaven he had killed, instead, all the faults of his faulty wife and the sweetheart of his youth. Almighty Maker, did his crime deserve this!

Gradually the physical agony left him, only to be followed by the mental anguish.

"Bee," he moaned, "Bee, won't you get up and walk with me? We shall not go far, for it is late. I want to tell you what we shall do with the back drawing-room in the summer. Don't you remember how I told you once, love, and you were pleased and kissed me, Bee? It is about building the little conservatory for you. You will get up and walk with me a little way. Do, Bee. Let me lift you up."

He stretched out his hand and caught something.

"Cold!

"Cold!"

Then he shuddered and drew back. A third and final change came with the touch of that dead woman's hand. All illusion left him, and, covering the face of the dead, he crawled out of the tank —the murderer of his wife.

Still overhead hung the black sky, still abroad brooded the unbroken stillness.

He looked deliberately around him. What had been done could not be undone, and he had now only to make the best of the situation. Already he felt one good result from his greater crime; it had dwarfed the other to insignificant proportions. The theft now seemed a trifle.

But what had happened to Daneford and the country round, and the grounds about his house, and the tower upon which he stood? Some strange change had come over the relations between

him and them. What was it? Daneford, and the country round, and the ground at his feet had receded, gone back from him. He was farther from them than he had been that day. What a strange sensation!

The sensation was very peculiar. He had never felt anything like it before. What had that morning seemed most important to him had now sunk into insignificance. Nothing was of consequence—save One; namely, the chance of a stranger coming to the top of that tower while It remained there.

The feeling was new to Grey, for he was new to the situation he had that night created. The solitude of a vast desert of sand under the pale stars, the solitude of the topmost frozen peaks of the Himalaya, the solitude of an ice-locked Arctic sea, the solitude for a hunted man of an unknown city, is profound and awful; but all combined and intensified a hundred-fold are nothing compared with the appalling solitude upon which man enters when over one shoulder, he knows not which, peers for ever the face of a murdered victim.

That face had not yet come to Grey, but as he descended the muffled stairs of the Tower of Silence he felt her cold lips touch his forehead once again; and once again he plunged forward on his way, caring little for life.

PART II. THE TOWERS OF SILENCE.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGER AT THE CASTLE.

"Maud, darling," said Mrs. Grant, "a gentleman dressed in black, who will not give his name, and says he wants to see you most particularly, has arrived. What message do you wish to send him? Will you see him?"

"Oh, Mrs. Grant, I can't see any one. How can any one be so unreasonable as to think I can see him to-day! Such a day for a stranger to call!"

Both ladies were in the deepest new mourning.

"Mr. Grey has also come. He sends word that he could not think of intruding upon you, but that if you wish to see him he is at your service."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Grant! Dear Mrs. Grant, do save me! Tell them all that I am too wretched to see any one. Thank them all for me, dear Mrs. Grant, and save me from them. Pray, save me from them!" The girl threw her arm round the widow and sobbed helplessly.

"No, no, my child, they shall not come near you. I only brought you the messages. I do not ask you to see any one. You shall, my darling Maud, do just as you please. A number of other people have come too. Many of Sir Alexander's old friends. But you hardly know these. My only thought was, might you wish to see Mr. Grey, who is doing everything; and I wondered if you might not wish to say something to him. I wondered if you might not like to tell him some last wish, for they will start presently—in less than an hour."

The girl made a strong effort, and succeeded in calming herself.

"Dear Mrs. Grant, try to forgive me. I am too selfish. But I am distracted. I never knew till now how fond I was of—of my father, and it would be rude and ungrateful in me not to see Mr. Grey after all his care and trouble. What should we have done without him? Not a soul belonging to us near us. Dear Mrs. Grant, will you go to him and say—don't send a servant, he deserves all the courtesy we can show him—say to him I would go to him myself, but the house and place is so—so crowded, and I am not very—strong. Say I should like to see him, if only for a moment, to thank him. Go, please go. I would not for the world have him think that I did not feel gratitude for all his kindness."

This was on Wednesday, 31st of October, 1866, ten weeks after the blowing up of the steamship *Rodwell*, on her way from Daneford to Seacliff, and a few days more than eight weeks after the visit of Joe Farleg to the banker Grey at the banker's residence, the Manor, Daneford.

On the preceding Saturday—that is to say, October the 27th—Sir Alexander Midharst had passed quietly away. The doctors had foretold correctly; and from the 17th of August to the 27th of October Sir Alexander Midharst had never had a lucid moment.

While the baronet lay insensible Grey was, as he had foretold, much at the Castle, but in that time nothing of importance arose. Grey had gradually fallen into the position to be occupied by him of right when the old man died, and was consulted on all matters of moment connected with the estate and the Island. In fact, after the first few weeks of Sir Midharst's complete unconsciousness, the direction of affairs fell almost wholly into his hands. He originated all

matters of consequence, and, having asked and obtained Miss Midharst's approval, saw them carried out.

This bright, crisp, last day of October was the day of the funeral. For this ceremony Grey had made the arrangements. Only personal friends of the late baronet and twenty of the principal tenants were to go to the Island for the purpose of carrying the body from the Castle to the slip, and accompanying it across the water. The remainder of the tenants, and all others desirous of attending the funeral, were to assemble on the mainland and await the body. When the coffin had been landed, the procession would proceed in a certain determined order; and as the deceased had no near relative, and no relative near or distant was to be present, Mr. Grey, in virtue of his long connection with Sir Alexander, and of the relations in which the will would place him to Sir Alexander's child, was to occupy the place of chief mourner.

Mrs. Grant found the banker in the library, and gave him, in a somewhat modified form, the message Miss Midharst had sent to him. Without saying a word he left the room, following the lady.

"Where is the strange gentleman who wanted to see Miss Midharst, and would not give his name?" asked the lady, as they passed down the corridor leading to the staircase. "I did not see him in the library. Oh, here he is."

They encountered a tall, slight, sad-faced man clad in black.

Mrs. Grant stopped, Mr. Grey fell back a few paces, and the widow said:

"I am sorry Miss Midharst is so much distressed just now that she does not feel equal to seeing you. You will of course understand that the circumstances are very trying upon her."

The stranger bowed, and answered in a low, quiet, full voice:

"I am deeply grieved by Miss Midharst's trouble. I would not think of seeking to intrude upon her but for good reasons. There is no absolute necessity for my seeing her at this moment. Later I hope to have an opportunity of expressing personally to her my sympathy, and of saying what further I wish to say. I am much indebted to you for the effort you have made in my behalf."

He indicated that he had nothing to add, and by keeping bowed showed that he did not desire to detain Mrs. Grant longer.

When she and the banker were out of the stranger's hearing, she said to Grey:

"Do you know who that gentleman is? I have never seen his face before."

"I do not know who he is. Nor have I seen his face before."

It was well for Grey they were in the dimly-lighted corridor, because he blenched and staggered for a moment.

"Who can this man be?" he thought, "who has such urgent business with Miss Midharst? Can this swarthy solemn man be here on *official* business connected with—with Miss Midharst's money? He looks a gentleman, but talks too like a book for one. A detective? That would be a nice finale to this ceremony.

"Dear Miss Midharst, here is Mr. Grey come to see you," said Mrs. Grant, opening the door of the little drawing-room and ushering in the banker.

Grey entered with a calm, sympathetic face.

Maud had collected herself, and was now much less distressed than when Mrs. Grant left her a little while before. She held out her hand, and said, in a tone, under the transient sadness of which could be felt the steady current of grave gratitude,

"Mr. Grey, you will add to all your great kindness if you consider my inexperience and how little I know the way to tell you my thanks. I feel ashamed I am not able to express them; but I know you will understand my gratitude even though I cannot put it in words. Mrs. Grant and you are the only friends I have in the world; and if it were not for you two, I think I should die."

He took her hand respectfully, and retained it a moment.

"Mrs. Midharst, I beg of you not to trouble yourself about such matters. I know Mrs. Grant is invaluable; but as to me—you are aware what I promised Sir Alexander about you, and if you trouble yourself to thank me I shall begin to suspect you imagine I find it irksome to do towards the living what I have sworn to the dead."

"Oh, no, no, no! Forgive me! I only meant to tell you I am very grateful, and don't know how to say it. Indeed, you must think nothing of the kind, Mr. Grey. Tell me you forgive me!" She stretched impetuous appealing hands to him, and looked out of soft tear-dimmed eyes into his.

For a moment his admiration of her delicate beauty overcame everything else, and he remained gazing silently into that sweet young pleading face—that face pleading to him to believe she felt grateful to him. Then he came back to the circumstances and the time, and said,

"There is only one thing I shall never forgive you."

"And what is that?"

"If you discover any way in which I can be of use to you and fail to let me know."

"You are too good, Mr. Grey. How shall I ever thank you?"

He waved her speech aside with a deprecating gesture and a faint smile. "I have come merely to know if I can be of use to you? Is there anything you wish done you did not mention to me yesterday?"

"No, nothing. Only I cannot meet any one. If I must go to the library by and by, that will be more than I should like to see of people. Some gentleman, who did not give his name, and whom I do not know and can't see, has asked me to meet him. If you speak to him you will explain and apologize for me."

"I will, most assuredly," and, bowing once more, the banker retired.

"Who can this man be who has come to the Island uninvited, and seeks to thrust himself upon Miss Midharst such a day as this? Can it be anything has been discovered? I have no assurance but Farleg's word that he did not tell some one besides his wife what he saw in the Tower-room that evening after the blowing up of the *Rodwell*. But then, if he did tell, it is not to this place the owner of such news would come, but to me at the Bank or at the Manor. If this man is here for any unpleasant purpose, it must be in connection with the Consols. There is nothing else to cause the dangerous presence of such a man. If he is here about the Consols, what does he know?"

By this time Grey had reached the library-door, and stood a moment with his hand on the handle. Suddenly his face cleared, as, with a sigh of relief, he thought,

"What right have I to assume he is here for an unpleasant or disastrous purpose? His gloomy face has put a gloomy notion into my head, that is all."

He entered the room, and found the tall, sad-faced stranger alone; the others, those who had been invited, were now assembling in the great hall, where the body of the baronet lay beneath a black velvet pall, under the eyes of his painted ancestors, who stared at the crowd from their gilded frames on the walls.

Mr. Grey approached the stranger with a bland face and conciliatory carriage, saying, "You find us, sir, in very great confusion to-day, and I must apologize to you for any want of courtesy you may have felt. I am sure, however, you will make allowances for us under the melancholy circumstances."

The stranger bowed gravely, and said, in a deep, full voice, "I have experienced no want of courtesy; on the contrary, every one I met has been most polite."

"I feel," Grey went on, with a graceful and urbane gesture of the hand,—"I feel myself more or less responsible for the good treatment of all guests here to-day. My name is Grey. I have just come from Miss Midharst. I understand you wish to see her, and, I am sorry to say, she does not feel herself equal to an interview; but if you will favour me with any communication for her, or let me know the nature of your business, I shall be happy to do anything I can for you." Grey spoke in a kind and winning manner. "There is no knowing what facts he may be in possession of, and nothing can be lost by politeness to him," was Grey's reflection.

"I am very much obliged to you," answered the stranger, with a slight inclination of the head; "but I shall reserve what I have to say until I have an opportunity of saying it later in the day to Miss Midharst herself."

There was in the manner of the speaker a profound and imperturbable self-possession most disquieting to the banker. The latter rejoined,

"But, indeed, I greatly fear she will not be able to see you any time to-day."

The stranger smiled faintly, waved the point aside with an air of perfect assurance, and asked, "Will you be good enough to tell me when and where the will is to be read? I am told it is to be read."

"May I know why you ask?"

"Because I intend to be present?"

"In what capacity?"

"I shall explain then."

"The will is to be read in this room to-day, when we have returned from the funeral. Such was Sir Alexander's wish."

"Thank you. I shall be here. When does the funeral start?"

Grey looked at his watch. "In quarter of an hour."

"I will not detain you further, Mr. Grey. I know your time is fully occupied to-day;" and with a bow which indicated the interview was over, he withdrew towards the window.

Grey was completely confounded between dread of the knowledge this man might possess and

the disagreeable sensation awakened by the sense, for the first time experienced in his life, of having met a man, foot to foot and eye to eye, who was a more able fencer than himself.

As Grey took his way from the library to the hall, he felt far from easy. He did not want men near him, and he did not want strange men; he did not want strange men more than a match for him in fence; and, above all, he did not want this man, who was not only a stranger and a better master of the foils, but who, moreover, had matter of importance to communicate to Miss Midharst, and displayed a plain conviction he should that day have an opportunity of speaking to Miss Midharst, notwithstanding her denials.

And now he had declared his intention of being present at this old-fashioned reading of the will. What could that mean? Who could he be that thus insisted upon thrusting himself upon this house of mourning?

Then a terrible fear rushed in upon Walter Grey's mind. Could it be that at the last moment the old man had altered his will and appointed a second trustee, one to act in conjunction with him, Grey, and that this cool self-possessed man was that second trustee? If it were so, the alteration in the will was Grey's death-warrant.

But much remained to be done in little time; so Grey hastened to the hall, and was soon lost in the business of getting the funeral under way.

As the funeral was about starting from the Castle to the Ferry, and just as Mr. Grey had placed himself immediately behind the coffin, the stranger stepped up to the banker's left side, and saying, "Pardon me," slipped his right arm under the left arm of the other.

Grey looked hastily over his shoulder.

"You will let me walk with you. I assure you I have ample authority."

Grey staggered, so that the other had to steady him. "Authority! ample authority!" thought the banker in dismay. "What can the nature of that authority be? Has he a warrant in his pocket to arrest me for the murder of my wife? Does he defer putting it into execution just now, so as to avoid making a scene; and has he thus taken my arm to prevent the chance of my escape?"

Or had he come down with a warrant in his pocket to arrest him the moment the will had been read? It might be that someone at the Bank had discovered the Midharst Consols had been sold; and the only evidence wanting in the chain would be supplied by a reference in the will to the stock, thereby showing that Sir Alexander, at the time of his death, was under the impression the stock was still his, thus proving it had not been disposed of with the baronet's knowledge.

Grey felt himself powerless to resist. He thought it best to raise no question, make no demur. The cold sweat broke out on his forehead; he knew his voice would tremble if he essayed to speak. He bowed his head in token of acquiescence, and the funeral proceeded to the Ferry.

"Can it be," thought Grey in an agony of fear—"Can it be, while I am walking after the body of him whom I have robbed, they are gazing on the body of her I have murdered."

They reached the boats, and were ferried across to the main land.

They re-formed, and were joined by a vast gathering of tenants, labourers, and others. The procession set off once more.

During all this time the stranger remained silent. He did not address a single word to Grey, nor Grey to him.

During all this time Grey was suffering the agony of the rack. He felt confident he was about to be attacked, but he did not know whence the attack would come, or what the nature of it might be. A successful attack of any kind upon him could have but one result—Destruction.

On the way back to the Castle the stranger seemed plunged in still deeper reverie; and beyond a few of the most ordinary common-places, not a word passed between Grey and him.

All throughout the stranger kept on the left-hand side of Grey.

All throughout Grey saw at his left shoulder the Nemesis of his fate, and over the right the pallid face of his murdered victim.

CHAPTER II.

THE READING OF THE WILL.

"Now, Maud darling, do try to bear up. Drink this wine to give you strength. Come, they are all waiting for us in the library. Drink this for my sake. Well, half; drink half of it for my sake, my dear, dear child. It was your father's direct order the will should be read and you should be present. Mr. Shaw tells me this is not usual, but must be done."

"I cannot drink the wine. It will not take long, I suppose?"

"Mr. Grey says that it is not likely to take more than quarter of an hour. The will is very short."

"Is Mr. Grey in the library?"

"Yes, dear."

"Please, put away that wine; I am ready to go now. You will come with me?"

"Of course, Maud. My place is at your side, poor darling."

Mrs. Grant's words touched some chord in the girl's heart, and she burst into tears, crying:

"Oh, Mrs. Grant, I never felt lonely before. I don't know what I should do, only for you and Mr. Grey."

"Thank you, love. You know I'll stay with you all my life. I have no one of my own to live for; they are all gone. I have no father or mother, or brother or sister, or husband or child. I am as lonely as you, Maud; only you have lost a father and this home, and by and by you will marry and have a new home, a husband, and little ones at your knee; but for me the world is over. Every day I live keeps me further off from my husband; every day you live brings you nearer to yours. Ah, Maud, women have but poor lives of it, and the poor childless widow is worse than the dead." She burst into tears.

"Mrs. Grant," cried the girl, throwing her arms round the woman, "pray, pray forgive me! I have been cruelly selfish, thinking only of my own sorrow and never of yours. Dear Mrs. Grant, do forgive my selfishness!"

The widow wound her arms around the weeping girl, and crushing back her own grief, said passionately:

"Selfish, Maud! you selfish! Why, my darling never thinks there is such a person as herself until she finds she can be of use to some one. No, love, not selfish. There, love, love, don't cry; we shall be the best of friends all our lives. We are both friendless and alone; that is all the more reason why we should be good friends all our lives, Maud darling. I'll never leave you if you will let me stay. There now, there's a dear child; dry your eyes and drink the wine, and let us go and get this matter over."

"Put away the wine; I am ready. We shall never, never part, Mrs. Grant dear."

The two left the little drawing-room. Mrs. Grant put one arm affectionately round the girl's waist; Maud held one of Mrs. Grant's hands in hers.

As they drew near the library-door they found Mr. Grey awaiting them in the passage. Placing himself on her right side, he offered her his arm. Mrs. Grant dropped to the rear, and, preserving this order, they reached the library-door.

Here Mr. Grey paused for a moment, and said to his partner in a low voice:

"The strange gentleman who would not give his name is within. He says he has authority to be present. He may be a solicitor on behalf of some of the smaller legatees. I do not wish to be rude to him or to say he must give me his authority. He says he will speak to you some time to-day. Do you wish me to tell him to go, or do you prefer that I should merely request him to give up all hope of an interview to-day?"

"I cannot, I cannot see him," cried the girl, clinging to his arm, and looking up appealingly into his face.

"Protect her," he thought, "against this unknown man, who seems to threaten my safety and her peace, of course I shall. This is the first time she has sought my protection, and by a fortunate chance it is against one whom I have reason to dislike. How lucky! How lucky I have been in everything connected with this Castle—about the will, about the old man's illness, about the confidence! All has turned out exactly as I wished. Her arm is now in mine. She is calling out to me for help. I feel already as if I had won her; as if she leaned upon my arm as my—wife."

Then he whispered to her,

"Rest assured this man shall not intrude upon you. If he keeps quiet he may remain until the will has been read. Then I shall be officially installed as your guardian, Miss Midharst, and I shall know how to act towards him if he dares to interfere with you."

Drawing himself up to his full height, he walked slowly into the library with Miss Midharst on his arm, and Mrs. Grant following a few paces behind. His face was calm and firm; in his tread and gait there was conscious power. He felt he could have faced any danger then. She, upon whose good regard towards him and final acceptance of him as a suitor all depended, hung on his arm and clung to him for protection. The chance that the Tower of Silence would in his lifetime give up its secret was one to a million. He had a single reasonable cause of dread, and that was lest she, Maud Midharst, might turn away from him—might finally reject him. With her arm on his, and the memory of her confiding glance, he felt like a great captain, who, having in secret prepared a crushing attack, throws up his head and pants at hearing the great bay of the signal-gun which is to shake out the standards and let loose the thunders of prodigious war.

No more than a dozen people were present. The servants stood at the end of the room remotest

from the one large window.

With its back to the window, at the head of the table, was the baronet's great straight-backed oak chair, empty. Mr. Grey led Miss Midharst to a chair on the right of this. As she moved up through the room, half a dozen gentlemen, seated round the room and at the table, rose and bowed. The stranger, whose chair was at the foot of the table, rose with the rest, and bowed more profoundly than any of the others.

As soon as Miss Midharst was seated, Mr. Grey crossed at the back of the vacant chair and sat down upon the left of it. Upon Grey's left sat Mr. Shaw, the deceased baronet's lawyer. On Miss Midharst's right sat Mrs. Grant. Dr. Hardy, who had attended the funeral, was present by particular request. The old lawyer, whose hands were tremulous, closed his eyes up firmly first, pulled his white whiskers, shook his white hair, and, looking at Grey, demanded in a feeble shaky voice:

"Is everything now ready for reading the last will and testament of Sir Alexander Midharst, deceased, as by him desired?"

For a moment there was no reply. Then Grey cleared his throat and said, in soft gentle accents:

"As the heir to the baronetcy and property did not reply to my notification of the late Sir Alexander's death, and therefore was not to be here at the reading of the will, or represented by a solicitor, he being, I understand, in Egypt, I have taken it upon myself to nominate a solicitor to be present on his part. I have therefore asked Mr. Barrington to be good enough to favour us with his presence, and watch the interests of the heir."

An excessively fat and prosperous-looking young man stood up and bowed deeply all round, saying, in a rich oily voice:

"I am proud to represent the heir to this noble house, this lordly property, and the glorious family of Midharst."

Having bowed all round again, he sat down.

Then Mr. Shaw opened the will, and began reading it in a weak and quavering voice.

The will was brief, and the language straightforward and plain.

The baronet left small legacies to his servants, and expressed a desire that Michael might remain in his daughter's service, until he chose to retire, upon which he was to receive an annuity of forty pounds a year, in addition to the five hundred pounds, payable within one year from the opening of the will.

The few other servants kept by the baronet were left legacies on this scale in proportion to their positions.

To Mrs. Grant he left a thousand pounds, coupled with a request that she would continue to stay with Miss Midharst as her companion as long as Miss Midharst might wish.

Upon hearing this Mrs. Grant wept, and put her hand on the girl's hand and caught the hand, and looked at the girl with eyes that swore, "Never, never, will I leave you while I live."

To Dr. Hardy he left two hundred and fifty, and to each of the other two physicians who had attended, one hundred pounds over and above their proper fees.

To Mr. Shaw he bequeathed five hundred pounds, over and above his proper fees, and expressed a hope that any legal business which had to be done in connection with his will, his daughter, or the money, would be intrusted to Mr. Shaw.

To Henry Walter Grey he bequeathed the gross sum of five thousand pounds, over and above all his just claims against the estate. Two thousand five hundred of this was to be paid within twelve months of the opening of the will, and the other two thousand five hundred upon the expiration of Grey's guardianship. This was bequeathed in grateful remembrance of many years of careful guardianship of the testator's fortune in the past, and in consideration of the duties and obligations imposed upon the legatee by the will.

The next clause announced that he left and devised and bequeathed to his daughter Maud, absolutely and for ever, the residue of his property of all kinds, sorts, and descriptions whatever, subject to the bequests above mentioned; and the payment of all just debts and demands for which the testator was liable at the time of his death; and the cost of his funeral, which latter he desired to be simple and unostentatious, and yet not unbecoming the house of which he was head. The residue was not to be paid over to the legatee, but held in trust for her until she had attained the full age of twenty-two. It was the testator's wish that his daughter should not marry until she had attained the full age of twenty-two: but married or single, to her the residue was to go when she attained her twenty-second year. With regard to her marriage, the testator would make no restrictions. He felt sure his daughter would make no unworthy selection, and she would remember that although the title and estates were passing away to a younger branch of the family, she was the only representative of the elder branch now surviving. The testator desired that, should she not marry before her twenty-second year, she should lean upon her guardian for advice at any time later than her twenty-second year. The testator desired it to be clearly understood that the guardian's power extended absolutely only to the property of the residuary

legatee; and that she, being at the time of executing this will and testament, full twenty years of age, in all her personal movements, and in the marrying or not marrying, or in the choice of a husband, was free from the greetings of these presents. That is to say, the guardianship of the residuary legatee, as constituted herein, was that of administering her fortune, and of looking after her welfare, without, except in the matter of the property, power of constraint or interference in matters personal to the residuary legatee. The testator, however, reposed the most unlimited confidence in the guardian, and advised the residuary legatee to be largely guided in matters personal by the advice of the aforesaid guardian.

Following this paragraph came one reciting the property of the deceased man, the most important passage of it being this:

"And such Consols as may be found registered in my name in the books of the Bank of England, an account of which, and the Consols themselves, are in the custody of Henry Walter Grey aforenamed, to the value at this date of five hundred and fifty thousand pounds sterling."

Then came the final paragraph:

"And I hereby elect and appoint Henry Walter Grey, of the Manor House, Daneford, banker (hereinbefore described as Henry Walter Grey), executor and trustee to this my last will and testament, to hold authority, and to act in all matters connected with my property at his own sufficient discretion, with the limitations herein aforesaid. And I hereby elect and appoint the same Henry Walter Grey, of the Manor House, Daneford, banker, to be and to act as the sole guardian, with the limitations hereinbefore set forth, of my only daughter Maud, hereinbefore described as of the Castle of Warfinger, the residuary legatee in this my last will and testament. And to the aforesaid Henry Walter Grey I leave the burden of the safe guarding of my daughter's fortune, and the care of her orphanhood. I leave to his charge the savings of half a lifetime, and the last of a noble house. I pray that, as Henry Walter Grey may do by them and me, the God Almighty may do by him. Amen."

The old solicitor then read out the formal ending of the will, looked up, shut his eyes, and said:

"That is the only will which has been found of the late Sir Alexander Midharst, Baronet, of Warfinger Castle."

He opened his eyes for a moment, and then shut them again, adding while they were closed:

"The will is in my handwriting. I drew it at the late baronet's dictation, using almost his identical words."

He turned over the document, and scrutinised it closely.

"There is no codicil or addition of any kind," bowing to Miss Midharst.

There was a moment's silence, during which every one present looked down.

It was only by the most powerful effort Grey could prevent himself from shouting aloud under the intolerable relief. Although he had expected the will to be in some such terms, he could scarcely believe that, after his days and nights of agonised dread, all had come right. He felt like one who, after long durance in a dim and choking cave, is lifted into a sunlit flowery valley, over which larks are singing, and through which flows a bright silver stream, along which he may wander with unquestioned feet.

Now all was secure. This girl and her whole fortune had, within the past half-hour, been signed and sealed into his possession. True, he had no control over her personal actions. But he soon should have control, the most potent of all—the control of husband over wife. According to the will, she might marry as soon as she pleased. There was nothing now in the world to prevent her being his wife in twelve months.

Nothing to interfere with his marrying this girl and blotting out the trace of his crime. Already she liked him. As they came into that room to hear that will read, by which he became sole executor, trustee, and guardian, did she not lean on him? Already she liked him. Soon she should love him. Soon she should marry him.

Considering her position, the world would approve of her marrying; for she had no one to protect her but a guardian, no kin near enough to take any interest in her. In her solitary situation, every one would approve of her marrying soon.

There was a rustle, and all the men rose to their feet upon perceiving Miss Midharst in the act of rising.

Grey looked across for a moment at her, as she stood upon the right hand of the vacant chair.

"She mine!" he thought. "She will be my salvation! There is nothing now to keep her from me! Nothing between her and me!"

"Miss Midharst," said a deep grave voice at the other side of the table, "I fear there is no one here who can introduce me to you, so that I shall be obliged to introduce myself."

Grey started, and looking across the table, saw the stranger advancing towards Miss Midharst.

The banker threw one glance around, by which he plainly told the other men that he intended

resenting so unwarrantable an intrusion on the grief and privacy of the occasion. All his fears had vanished into air. The only feeling he now experienced was that a pushing stranger was seeking to occupy the unwilling attention of his legally constituted ward, and the woman who was to be his wife.

Grey crossed the room rapidly at the back of the vacant chair, and placing himself beside Miss Midharst, bowed and offered her his arm.

She took it, and for a second no one moved.

Maud looked up and saw in front of her a tall, broad, dark-visaged, black-haired, sad-featured man, with dark and dreamy eyes.

She shrank back slightly, and clung to the stalwart arm on which her small white hand lay.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the banker blandly, "I shall be happy to place myself at your disposal when I have led Miss Midharst to her private apartment. May I request you to take a seat until then?"

"Thank you, sir. Your name is Grey."

"It is. And as you have heard the will, you know I am in a position to tell you that anything you have to say to Miss Midharst may, under present circumstances, be more reasonably said to me." The banker advanced his foot, and Maud, still clinging to him, moved to go.

Again the stranger bowed low to Miss Midharst. It was impossible, without downright rudeness, for Grey to move until the stranger should have recovered an erect attitude, as evidently there was something else he wished to say.

"Miss Midharst," at last the stranger said, "I am William Midharst, your cousin;" he held out his hand to her.

"The new baronet!" murmured the servants, in whispers. All the men looked keenly at the tall dark young man, who with a grave smile stood holding out a brown right hand to the fair, shrinking, timid, pale, beautiful girl.

She took her white trembling hand off the banker's arm and held it out to him. She was cold and trembling, and she felt as though she should faint.

He took the fingers of her white hand respectfully between the fingers and thumb of his own brown hand, and bending low with the homage of a chivalric age, and the simple sincerity of our own, kissed the white hand he held. Then, inclining his head towards the banker, he said gravely:

"Will you, sir, upon this occasion of my first meeting my cousin, forego your privilege, and allow me to take her to her apartment?"

The mind of the banker was dazed and paralysed, and in silence he signified his assent.

Placing the hand on the black sleeve of his left arm, Sir William Midharst, of Warfinger Castle, led his orphan cousin Maud down the room, and through the doorway.

As they disappeared Grey's face shrivelled up. Fortunately for him all present were too much occupied with the new baronet's arrival to notice him.

The whole fabric of Grey's rearing seemed to topple over and tumble into dust as these two figures went through the doorway. He was guardian it was true, but his power did not extend to his forbidding her to take that arm, to go through that doorway with that young man, to walk up to the altar-rails with any man whatever.

"Idiot that you have been, Alexander Midharst; you deserve nothing better than that your daughter's fortune should be lost!"

Then he stood a long time immovable.

At last the thought of the stake he had put down in this game rushed in upon his mind, and he was once more on the top of that Tower of Silence, under the dull sky with the Dead.

He now stood in the awful solitude of blood. He strode on through a realm of endless silence and limitless sand. For him there could never be any change here; always that maddening silence—always those unconquerable leagues of sand. Never any variety except——

He suddenly started and shouted. There had been a change in the monotony; for over his shoulder—not the one at which Maud had stood—over the right shoulder suddenly peered the face of his murdered victim.

With a pang of apprehension he became alive to his situation, and looked suddenly round. He was alone. All the others had left, and it was growing dark.

CHAPTER III.

"COUSIN MAUD——" "NO; MAUD."

When the young baronet reached the corridor he said in a grave sedate voice:

"I knew your name was Maud; and I knew your poor father did not like me. I am sure you will believe me when I tell you I never saw him in all my life, never saw you until to-day, and never gave him any reason I know of to dislike me. It so happened I was heir to the property; it so happened I was poor. I could not help the former; I tried to do all I could to help the latter, and took an appointment in Egypt. It was such an appointment as a gentleman might take. You, Cousin Maud, had no feeling against me because I happened to be next to the title and estates?"

"Oh, no," answered the girl quickly, in a tremulous half-frightened voice, without looking up.

"And now that I have come to see you, cousin, you have no feeling against me?"

"Not the least. Why should I?"

"When you did not know who I was, you refused to see me to-day. Now that you know I am your cousin, the nearest relative you have on earth, will you do me a favour?"

"If I can, I will."

"Walk with me a while in the grounds; I have much to say to you. The air will do you good, and what I have to say will keep your mind off the sad business of to-day. Grant me this favour, if you do not feel too weak."

"I do not feel weak; only—only confused and frightened. I will go with you."

They had both halted at the foot of the grand staircase. She looked up into his face as she spoke. She had never seen one of her house but her father before. It was strange to think this man should be so unlike her father and yet related to her. He spoke as if he meant to be kind, and in any case she ought not to refuse so slight a favour to the only member of her father's family now living. As a child she had stood in mortal terror of this cousin—this cousin whom her father never lost an opportunity of abusing. But when she had grown older, she knew the young man did not, because he happened to be heir-presumptive to the property and title, deserve on that account solely to be vilified. Her father had always led her to think that towards her this cousin William would behave brutally, simply because her father had racked the property to the very uttermost penny. It had seemed natural that the next tenant for life would regard the acts of her father with strong resentment; and, taking into account the object for which the property had been swept clean, she felt William Midharst, when he came to be Sir William, could not look on her in a friendly spirit. But now that the worst had arrived, and he as a factor in the worst, it did not seem that he should have received such elaborate consideration, or have been the cause of any great dread. He was dark and gloomy-looking, but then he had been very polite.

While these thoughts were jostling one another in Maud Midharst's head, she was in her own room, preparing for that stroll with her cousin. The young baronet was walking softly up and down the great hall, and Wat Grey was standing transfixed by a new terror in the library the two young people had just left.

Presently Maud came down the great staircase. The young baronet looked up and saw a sweet, white, childish face, full of sadness in the midst of crape, and beneath that face a lithe graceful figure, moving as though the ground had nothing to do with her movements, her step was so free and light.

"My cousin Maud," thought the young man, "is too fair for health. Little cousin Maud—lonely little orphan cousin Maud—looks as if she and her father will not be long separated. I hope she is sufficiently clad. But then I must not forget I am used to swarthy faces and warmer skies. My little cousin Maud may live to wear a brighter look and gayer colours."

She was at his side now. All the other women in the world were nothing to him. She was his cousin. Back to the first litigious Sir John they both traced their lines—the great family of Midharst, which had come down through the noble house of Stancroft. His cousin Maud. They two were the last of the great house, they two. She, the pale, fragile, griefful lady, with the wonderful soft eyes, and shy half-frightened air and the pure young beauty. Good Heavens, how she sanctified the place! How she illumined the past! All the ladies of the Midharst house but her were dead: their portraits hung here and there upon the walls of this old historic castle. There was on the walls no lady of the Midharst line as beautiful as Maud. They were all dead and passed away. Around the walls hung the extinguished lamps of beauty in the Midharst house; here by his side stood the lamp clear and burning bright, the most beautiful and the only burning lamp in the house of Midharst—his beautiful cousin Maud.

"Cousin Maud," he said.

She looked up into his swarthy face, into his deep dark eyes, to show that she was attending, but did not speak.

"When I touched your hand first in all my life, a little while ago, there were many present, and you gave me your hand; it may have been merely to show those around us that you recognised me as the head of the family—the family of two. Will you now give me your hand as a private sign that you know of no reason why we should not be friends?"

She held out her hand to him. Not only was he not to be unfriendly, but he was going to be very kind, she thought.

He took her hand, and bending over it kissed the glove, and once more placing that hand on his arm, led her into the open air of the courtyard, under the great brown archway, and out into the shrubless bare grounds.

When they had got a little distance from the castle he broke silence:

"That tall good-looking gentleman, your guardian, Mr. Grey, was very nearly right in saying I was in Egypt; I have just returned. I have been only a few days in England. Upon my arrival I heard what had taken place, and came on as soon as possible. I got to Daneford last night, and put up at the Warfinger Hotel. It was then too late to call upon you, Cousin Maud. I did not send up my name to-day, because I feared, if you knew my name, you might, out of respect to the old feeling, refuse to see me."

He paused a moment as if to arrange his thoughts.

She, without raising her eyes from the ground, murmured,

"You were very kind."

She did not in saying this mean he had displayed kindness in his past action, but that he was displaying kindness to her now.

He understood her, and went on:

"I shall have to go back to Egypt immediately, and I cannot possibly return to England for some months. I shall be here again as soon as I can. Before I go away I want to establish a great friendship with you. I want you to make up your mind to disregard anything you have ever heard to my disadvantage, and look upon me as the head of the family of two, and your best and truest friend. I want you to promise me that at once, to-day—before I leave you—now."

His manner was very fervid and intense as he came towards the end. At the word "now" he ceased to walk.

She looked up. What a change had taken place in that placid, grave, sad face of a few moments before! The dark eyes were full of fire, the delicate nostrils moved, and the swarthy cheek was flushed. He rose up over her, tall and broad and fierce and strong. She trembled, but could not take her eyes from his. She had never met any man like this before. He fixed her attention upon him and upon his words beyond the power of her control. She was frightened and surprised.

"What am I to do?" she asked fearfully.

"You are always to look on your cousin William Midharst as your best friend. Will you promise me that here and now?"

"Yes."

"You promise."

"I promise."

"Very well, that is settled," he said in a quick way. "Let us move on. Now I have other things to say to you of as great importance. You must listen to me very patiently. When you do not understand what I say, you are to stop me and ask me to explain. Won't you?"

"Yes," very timidly.

"Now, from the little I have seen of your guardian, I like him very well, and I have no doubt no wiser selection could have been made. Those people I met in Daneford had something to say about events here, and every one who spoke said good things of him; when every one says good things of a man he must be a good man. Do you like your guardian? I believe you know him some time?"

"I know him since I was a child and I like him very much. No one could have been more kind or considerate than he; and I know my poor father had the greatest confidence in him."

She said this with more animation and earnestness than she had yet shown. Her gratitude to Grey was profound, and she did not wish her cousin should be for a moment in doubt of her feelings in the matter.

"That is all right: I am delighted to hear you say so. Now Mr. Grey has full and complete control of your fortune; that is a mere trifle."

She looked up at him in some surprise and said,

"I understood that Mr. Grey had a large sum."

"I did not mean that your fortune is a mere trifle, but that the fact of its being in his hands rather than any other honest man's is a mere trifle. What I wished to do was to draw a contrast between the comparatively triviality of the guardianship of your money compared with that of another thing."

His eyes were now fixed, staring ahead; and although she looked up into his face, he did not glance down, and she could gather no information through her eyes.

She said, in a tone of faint wonder:

"I do not know what you mean. My father always told me I should have nothing but the money."

Still keeping his eyes fixed ahead, he said, in a dull, slow, dreamy way:

"Well, there was one thing in your father's gift, for a time at all events, and the will gives it to no one. Supposing the guardianship of that thing were in your gift now, would you, considering that I am the only relative you have alive, and that you have agreed to look on me as your best friend, —would you, I ask, give me the guardianship of that thing?"

"But is there any such thing? I certainly never heard of it," she said, in greater wonder.

"There is such a thing."

"And it is in my power to give you the guardianship?" she asked.

"Absolutely, Cousin Maud."

"And you really wish to take the troublesome care of this, whatever it may be?"

"I do."

"Then I give it to you freely."

"And you will give me as absolute control over it as if it had been formally made over to my care by the will of your dead father?"

He had now paused in his walk once more, and was standing looking down on her, not with the fiery eyes of a few moments ago, but with deep, careful, anxious eyes, as though matter of great moment depended on her answer.

Under his steady glance she felt her head grow confused and hot. She did not know quite clearly what was passing, but she knew he had asked her to do something, and she must do it. "I promise," she said, very faintly.

This time he spoke with the most elaborate clearness of articulation, slowly and with emphasis:

"You promise to make over to me the guardianship of the thing to which I allude as absolutely as though it had been made over to me by your father's will."

"I do."

"Then it is the guardianship of my cousin, Maud Midharst."

"The guardianship of me! But Mr. Grey is my guardian!"

"Yes and no. He is the guardian of your fortune absolutely. But with respect to your own personal action you are left free. You are recommended by your father to apply to him for advice, but you are not bound to do any one thing he asks you, or to accept his advice beyond money matters. In all matters except money you are to consult me. You have promised, and you will do so?"

"I will keep my promise, but it is strange." She dropped her eyes, and again the two moved forward.

His face gradually lost its intense expression, and assumed its usual dreamy far-away look. In a few moments he spoke:

"Yes, it is strange, and to me, Cousin Maud, very sweet, that I should be able to do the least thing for you. You must now rely on me wholly. You must take no important step without consulting me. You are as much under my charge now as if you were my daughter. My only regret in the matter is that I am compelled to leave England almost immediately, but I shall be back in as short a time as possible; in the meanwhile you may look to Mr. Grey for the advice you want from day to day. But if anything of importance should arise, you must write and tell it to me, and I will write back and tell you what to do. You understand?"

"Yes. You are very good to one you know so little of."

"Know so little of! Know so little of! Do I not know you through the history of our house? Is it because we never met, and I never set foot on the Island before, that we do not know much of one another? When I look at those old walls; when I think of the great house of Fleurey from which we are both come; when I think that you and I bear the one name, and that the very walls which protected your infancy and girlhood are mine in my manhood; when I learned that my cousin Alexander had died, and left my cousin Maud alone in the world with a huge fortune and no natural guardian but myself; when I saw my cousin Maud, and found her pale and timid and tearful—I knew her through the past and in the present; and, Cousin Maud, with the help of Heaven and a resolute will, I shall know her in the future, to the last hour I can be of the least service to her. Why, child, I was horrified to think of you all alone and unfriended, save for the friendship of a middle-aged busy man, who had no natural claim upon the privilege of your safe-guarding. I feared something might come between you and me to prevent my getting close to you as I am now, in your confidence, and in the consequence of your promise."

She had raised her eyes to his after the first few sentences. She had noted again the flush in the swarthy cheek, again the fire in the large dark eye. She caught the voice of passionate chivalry that rang out through his words, clear and sharp as the voice of the cornet when it alone holds up the theme to the melodious confluence of harmonious strains flowing from orchestra and stage.

"Cousin Maud——"

"No; Maud."

"Maud."

They paused again. He was still in thought, and looked into her eyes, not with the sight of intelligence, but with the sight of the physical eye merely.

He had aroused her confidence, her gratitude, her interest. She was looking at him with as much astonishment as though, upon turning her back, she found not the Weeslade and the Plain of Spears, but the streams and fertile land that lie around Damascus, and the long low line of the city's ruined walls against the northern sky.

Mutely she held out her hand to him. He took it in silence, shook off his absorbed manner, smiled softly on her, then the two resumed their walk. From that moment, from that hand-pressure, from that smile, from the soft sigh which greeted that smile, and the firm breathing and measured step with which he resumed the walk, it was plain their friendship had been sealed. He knew he had inspired her with confidence, and she knew she felt faith in this new cousin-friend, who had been a source of disquiet to her in her childhood, and was destined to be a source of sustentation and strength to her in her maiden years.

For a while they walked on in silence.

"And now, Maud, there is some detail I wish to speak to you about."

"Yes."

"You will of course continue to live here——"

"But I am no longer——" she interrupted.

"You will, *of course*, continue to live here. I shall not set out for Egypt for a few days, and in that time I will see that all things are put in order for you here. I understand that the lady who sat upon your right is the Mrs. Grant alluded to in the will?"

"Yes. She is my only friend——"

"Maud, your only friend!"

"I mean, of course, William, after you."

"That's a good child. Call me William always, and learn to think of Mrs. Grant as your *second* friend. I hope she will continue to stay with you. Do you think she will?"

"Oh, yes; she has promised. She is and has been a great and a good friend to me. I do not know what I should have done all through the last few months but for her. She has promised to stay with me as long as I like, and I know I shall like her to stay with me always."

He looked fixedly at the slender graceful figure by his side, the figure of the only woman in the world in whom he felt interest—the interest of blood. The idea that he was head of the family felt new to him. He had often tried to realise it before, but never until now did he know what it was to have any one dependent upon his protection; and the person so depending being his beautiful cousin Maud, the feeling was not only new, but sweet and purifying as well.

At length he said: "I wish I had not to go abroad; but, Maud, when I came away from Egypt I had intended to return, and left matters in such a state that my not going back would cause the greatest confusion, and I must not, because I have now become rich, treat badly the office so useful to me when I was poor. But I will be back to see that you are all right as soon as ever I can. Has your guardian, Mr. Grey, any sons?"

"No. He has no child. He never had a child."

"He is married, of course?"

"Yes, but he lost his wife in a dreadful accident that happened to a river steamboat some months ago."

"Then he is a widower?"

"Yes."

Sir William's brows fell, and he bent his eyes on the ground for a few seconds. He raised his head, and, partly closing his lids, looked dead ahead for a few seconds more.

"Your father's will was dated the 9th of June in this year. Had Mr. Grey lost his wife then?"

"No. Not, I think, for some months after. Now I remember, Mr. Grey was here at the moment the steamboat, on which his wife was, blew up. I remember now. That day we sent for Mr. Grey; Sir Alexander was raving about him and other things, and Mr. Grey was on the Island when the

vessel blew up. That night father became delirious finally. I now recollect it all."

"So that your father, while in possession of his senses, did not hear Mr. Grey had lost his wife?"

"No. Does it make any difference? Cannot a widower be guardian in a will?" She dreaded to lose the protection she had been taught to rely on.

"Oh, indeed, he can. It makes not the least difference in the eyes of the law whether a man has a wife or not, as far as his appointment of guardian in a will goes. I was asking merely for information's sake. And now, Maud, I think you had better go in. It is getting dark already, and I should like to have a little conversation with your guardian—your other guardian—before I leave. By the way, at first I was puzzled to think why Sir Alexander did not leave yourself under the absolute control of Mr. Grey, but I think I guess the reason. When the will was made you were old enough to take care of yourself in all ordinary everyday matters, and his feelings would not allow a daughter of his, a daughter of this house, to be under the control of a banker. I know that your father was a little peculiar, and had no friends or associates of his own rank. He made Mr. Grey guardian of Miss Midharst's fortune, but not of Miss Midharst herself. It is my lucky chance to occupy the latter flattering position. Good-bye, now, Maud. I am staying at the "Warfinger," in Daneford. I shall come over every day of the few I am in this place to see you."

They had now arrived at the library-door. It opened slowly, and a man appeared on the threshold, and stood still as if transfixed. Neither of the others noticed the presence of the man in the doorway.

Sir William went on: "Our meeting was very formal, and our greetings were very formal too. But we are good friends now, and loyal cousins. Cousins may be more affectionate, Maud, than strangers in blood. Good-day, Maud," said he, stooping and kissing her white forehead lightly. "Good-bye; and remember to take great care of yourself, and rely on me."

She moved slowly away.

He turned briskly to the library-door, and seeing the man on the threshold, said gravely:

"Mr. Grey, I am glad to have met you, and shall feel much obliged if you will favour me with a few moments' conversation."

Without saying a word Grey re-entered the library; the baronet followed him.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TWO GUARDIANS.

When the two men found themselves in the library it was quite dusk outside, and a deep gloom filled the room. There was no one else in the place, and no candle or lamp illumed the dark and cavernous recesses of shadows lying here and there remote from the great window.

"I will not detain you long, Mr. Grey. Do you wish for lights?"

"Not at all, Sir William."

This man, who had come in the morning as a stranger, and whom he, Grey, promised himself he would quickly eject if he made himself unpleasant or pushed himself upon Miss Midharst after the reading of the will, was now treating him, Grey, as a guest in that house! And not only that, but he had pushed himself upon Miss Midharst, and seemed to have got on very well with her, judging from the parting which had just taken place between them. The tables were turned on him, Grey, and the less light there was to expose his discomfiture the pleasanter for him. The gold was still leading, still leading, but only by a head; and the lead was gaining, hair's-breadth by hair's-breadth, every minute.

"Suppose we sit near the window, where the most light is," said Sir William.

They both moved towards the window, and, having taken chairs, the younger man began:

"In the first place, Mr. Grey, let me thank you most cordially for all your great kindness and care shown to Miss Midharst during this troublesome time. I assure you I shall never forget the debt of gratitude I owe you for your generosity and devotedness under the trying circumstances."

"I feel greatly flattered by your approval, Sir William. I have tried in my humble way to do my duty, and if I have failed I have failed through no want of desire to do my duty by the child of—if I may be permitted to call him so—my old friend Sir Alexander Midharst."

There was a strange mixture of emotions in Grey's voice as he spoke. Sarcasm and fear mingled freely, and the young man was for a moment in doubt as to how he should proceed. Mr. Grey, now alone and in the dark, did not impress him quite so favourably as earlier in the day, when others were present, and when the man's face and figure could be seen.

The young man paused a while, and made up his mind not to inquire into the constituents of that tone if it were not repeated.

"It," he thought, "may have been accidental."

Aloud he said, "I did not come into this neighbourhood until last night, and since then every one I met seems to have done nothing but sing your praise. All the people at the "Warfinger Hotel" have spoken in unstinted terms of respect. You must not think they knew who I was, for I gave no name. I was and am greatly delighted at this, for I hope from it you and I may get on well together, out of consideration to my cousin's comfort."

"I sincerely trust we may always get on well together. I certainly will not deliberately risk losing your good opinion."

This time there was nothing unusual or disquieting in the tone. Grey had himself caught the import of his own voice in his previous reply, and felt he had made a great mistake. It was very hard though for him, Grey, a man of his position and standing, to sit there and be blandly approved of by this young man—by this young man who seemed to take his own success in all things as a foregone conclusion. He, Grey, must play his cards carefully, and above all things he must not show the direction in which it was necessary for him to force the game. But he was in the dark; and if denied the expression of his feelings to his voice, he might allow them to run riot over his face, and it was a relief to frown and scowl and sneer in silence.

"I have first of all a favour to ask you, Mr. Grey."

"I am sure, Sir William, if it is in my power to grant it, I shall be only too happy to do so." This was said in the banker's most urbane accents.

"Well, I understand that your bank has kept the Midharst account for a long time; will you be kind enough to accept the keeping of mine?"

"The Midharst has been the most important of all our accounts for a long time, and we shall feel honoured and delighted if you will favour us with yours."

There was nothing very dreadful about this. It seemed as if the young baronet would turn out as confiding and uninquisitive as the old one. So far this looked promising.

"And now," said Sir William, "will you do me another favour?"

"If," returned the banker, in a gay tone of badinage, "the second *favour* at all resembles the first, I think I could go on granting you such favours all the night."

This young man was not only simple and confiding, but downright amiable and sociable.

"You must not think I am extravagant when I have said what I am going to say."

"My dear Sir William, if you want any money, you draw on us, as a matter of course, for any sum you may require. That is an affair of ordinary business, not favour; and it was quite unnecessary for you to say anything about it."

Things were growing more comfortable as they got along.

"Why, I should not wonder," thought Grey, with a smile that almost developed into a laugh,—"I should not wonder if he gave away the bride."

"But the sum I require is large."

"Draw on us for it in the morning."

"I don't think you would say so if you knew the sum."

"Try us. Draw on us to-morrow."

"Twenty thousand?"

"Only? I thought the sum was a serious one! You really must not think of attaching any importance to such a matter. My dear Sir William, you can draw on us for fifty thousand without notice. If you have the least occasion for more than fifty, just tell me four days before you draw, so that there may be no chance of a disappointment to you."

Grey thought, "Clearly this young man is in debt. How lucky! When a man is in debt and wants money badly he will do——" He paused, thought of his own case, shuddered, and whispered in the innermost solitude of the desert of crime where he and his spectre dwelt,—"he will do anything—murder!"

"You must not think I am in debt. I do not owe a shilling. I never did."

"That is highly creditable in a young man of your expectations," said Grey, in a tone of high admiration. To himself he said, "I'm sorry it isn't for debts he wants the money. What can he want the money for? Nothing good, I'll swear."

"You see, Mr. Grey, I may seem abrupt to you, but I do not mean to be so."

"I assure you I cannot guess why you for a moment imagine I could find reason to think you abrupt."

"Ah, well, yes! What I said about abruptness has rather to do with what I am about to say than with anything I have yet said. I am very quick to decide upon things, and very prompt to act, and

I may say without boasting that once I take a thing in hand I usually make it turn out as I wish; I like to do things that seem difficult; but I never undertake anything when I do not clearly see my way to realisation."

"Most useful, positively invaluable qualities," said Grey, in a tone of admiration; mentally he thought, "If what this man says of himself is true, my life depends upon the direction this cursed activity of his takes."

"I have to leave the country for a time. I must go back to Egypt for some months."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Grey. He could scarcely repress a cry of joy. To be rid, and rid quickly, of this dreamy energetic man was a mercy for which he did not dare to hope. "Do you leave England soon?" Grey asked in a tone of gentle sorrow.

"In a few days. Ten days at the outside, and before I leave I want the money, and to put the thing I have decided upon in trim."

"Can I be of any further assistance to you than financially?"

"Yes, I think you can, if you will be kind enough. You take a great interest in Miss Midharst?"

"Aha!" exclaimed Grey, as though he had been struck. The question of the young man caused the terrible importance of Miss Midharst to present itself suddenly to his mind. He saw at one glance the stakes he had put down, and the prize for which he was playing; and thus coming suddenly upon a bird's-eye view of his position, he received a violent shock, which forced the exclamation from him.

"What's the matter?" cried the young man, rising quickly and approaching the banker. "Are you hurt?"

"Pray excuse me. It is nothing, Sir William. Do be seated. I am very sorry for having alarmed you. Some little time ago I injured my knee—as I thought at the time, slightly; but it often gives me a single pang of most acute pain, and in crossing my legs just as you spoke that pang came, and I could not but cry out, if my life depended on not doing so. I know you will excuse me, Sir William; the pain is all gone. I think you were saying, when I so unhappily interrupted you, that you and I take a deep interest in Miss Midharst."

"You are sure you are all right?"

"Yes, quite sure."

"Did you ever hear the death-scream of a horse?"

"No, never."

"Your shout frightened me; it was like that. Well, as I was saying, we both take an interest in Miss Midharst. You know the way Sir Alexander treated this place. I heard of it, and to-day I see it."

"Yes; it is naked enough."

"Well, it is not a fit place for Miss Midharst to reside in now."

"I have been thinking, of course, of getting a suitable house for her until we are able to buy or build one."

"Oh, I don't mean anything of that kind. She is to stay here."

"Stay here! You do not know that from me, Sir William. It is not my intention. My intention was to place my own house at her disposal, and live in my town house."

"Oh, but it is all settled: she is to stay here."

"All settled! All settled, Sir William, and by whom?"

"By Miss Midharst and me."

"But—but—" Grey was trembling all over now, he knew not why—"but, Sir William, one would think Miss Midharst's guardian might have been consulted on the matter before all was settled."

"I assure you he was."

"But I pledge you my word, Sir William, this is the first I have heard of it."

"My dear Mr. Grey, there is some mistake. You surely do not imagine you are Miss Midharst's guardian?"

"Then, in the name of Heaven," cried Grey feebly, "if I am not, who is?"

"I."

"*You!* But the will does not mention your name!"

"Nor yours, as guardian of her person. You will take charge of Miss Midharst's fortune, as by will appointed. I will take charge of Miss Midharst herself, by position as head of the house. You did not catch the full drift of the meaning of the will. I paid particular attention to that paragraph."

"No doubt you are right, Sir William. I did not pay particular attention to that paragraph. I gathered that I was the only guardian named, and I concluded the conditions were the usual ones."

It was with the utmost difficulty Grey could prevent himself from betraying his conflicting passions. Now came personal anger against the young and determined baronet; now despair at the thought of having Maud removed from his personal custody. Sir Alexander had certainly given him to understand that he, Grey, was to be guardian to the girl; and here was he, after all he had done and risked, after he had died his hands in blood——Bah! that kind of thing would drive him mad. He must keep calm now if he did not wish to hang next month.

The young man continued: "That twenty thousand I want for putting this place to rights. I see already what I wish done to the grounds; before I leave I shall know what I want done to the building and furniture."

"By-and-by, I daresay," thought Grey, "you will find out what you want done with me."

The interview lasted little longer, and nothing of importance followed. As Grey went home that night he thought:

"He will be months away. I will be all these months here. Before he can be back she shall be mine. I know it, I feel it. I am not now very nice in the means I employ. She shall be mine before he returns by—some means or other."

CHAPTER V.

THE INDEFINITE PRESENT.

The morning after the funeral Mrs. Grant and Maud walked up and down one of the long, silent corridors for an hour. The evening before, when the widow and the young girl sat together in the firelight, Maud had told the other the main features of the facts in the interview between herself and Sir William. Beyond expressing a guarded and general approval of the baronet, Mrs. Grant said little. She had been too tired, and Maud too exhausted from fretting and anxiety, to allow of close inquiry or elaborate statement. Now they were less fatigued, the worst day of the bereavement had passed, and they were quietly discussing matters.

"You know, Maud, my dear, no matter how kind Sir William may be to you, it will not do for you to forget Mr. Grey," said Mrs. Grant, very gravely. "You must not think of defying him or going to law with him, or anything of that sort."

"Indeed, Mrs. Grant, I am thinking of nothing of the kind," replied the girl, looking with troubled eyes and anxious face at her only female friend.

"Because you know," continued the woman, without heeding the interruption or the appealing face—"you know very well the Greys have served the family faithfully for many years; and now the present Mr. Grey has sworn to serve you, and to take care of you, and to be good and kind to you; and I am sure he will; for though he is not such a gentleman by birth as your father or Sir William, still he's a most respectable man."

The widow had the feminine trick of taking the bit in her teeth and going straight on, no matter who pulled right or who pulled left.

"You may rely on my doing nothing of the kind. How can you think I would!" cried the girl fervently.

"Yes, but you mustn't," repeated the widow vehemently. "You must not throw over the friend of years for a man you never saw until yesterday."

"You ought not to say I am going to do anything so wicked—indeed you ought not. But remember that the man I met for the first time yesterday was my cousin, and the head of the Midharsts."

"But your father never liked him."

"My poor father never knew him."

"But he could have known him if he liked, and he didn't."

"That was prejudice."

"Maud!" cried the widow, in a tone of reproach.

The girl burst into tears.

"I did not mean to say anything disrespectful; but I can't bear to think my cousin insincere."

Mrs. Grant pressed the girl in her arms, and said:

"You must not cry; you must not weep, my love. I did not mean you had been disrespectful to your father's memory. Heaven forbid! But you must not be too hasty, and like everyone at first sight.

That will never do for a young heiress who has no right guardian."

The girl ceased to weep, and said in an unsteady voice:

"But I never told you I liked him."

"You do like him, Maud; you know you do."

"How could I like him in one meeting?"

"But, Maud, you do like him, and that is why I feel so uneasy."

"Indeed I don't like him. I am afraid of him: he makes me feel smaller and helpless. I never feel helpless when Mr. Grey is near me, for he can always tell me what to do; but I feel as if I must do what my cousin says, and after only one meeting too. I was ashamed to confess this until you made me."

Her luminous candid spirit looked out of the large soft eyes into the eyes of the woman.

Mrs. Grant stole her arm round Maud's waist, and for a while both walked on in silence. At length Mrs. Grant spoke:

"I am glad to hear that."

"To hear what?" asked Maud, in a tone of abstraction.

"That you take no interest in Sir William."

"What!" with a start. The eyes of the girl were once more fixed on the eyes of the widow. "I did not say that. On the contrary, he *does* interest me."

Mrs. Grant looked bewildered, and glanced helplessly around her, as if seeking someone to bear out what she was about to say.

"Why, child, you told me a moment ago that you did not like him, and that he frightens you!"

"That is true, but a lion frightens me, and I can't say that I like lions; but they interest me more than a King Charlie."

Maud smiled at the bewilderment of the other.

"But, my dear," said Mrs. Grant, with a look of grave trouble in her eyes, "what you say about lions and King Charlie is all nonsense. When you have a King Charlie you play with him, and feed him out of your hand. When you have a lion, you look at him through the bars of a cage. Besides, Maud, it is absurd and romantic to think of an English baronet as a lion. Suppose he was a lion, and he got loose, what should you do?"

"Run away as fast as I could," answered the girl, with a faint laugh.

"But if he caught you?"

"Oh, if he caught me I don't think I could do much."

"There now, Maud, I told you so."

Mrs. Grant had not told Maud anything about her chance of not being able, single-handed, to defend herself against a lion. When she said, "I told you so," she had suddenly lost sight of the monarch of the forest, and come upon the mental image of the baronet of the Island, in whom this girl had admitted she took an interest, which, in the illustration afforded by the lion, proved to be full of the gravest danger.

Miss Midharst had forgotten the baronet in the allegory, and was thinking only of the lion; so that when Mrs. Grant triumphantly said, "I told you so," Maud believed Mrs. Grant was contemplating the same image as herself—that is, her own disappearance down the lion's throat. So that Maud smiled and said:

"Fortunately there are very few lions in this part of the world, and one very seldom gets loose."

"On the contrary, there are very many lions in this part of the country, and they all go about seeking whom they may devour."

Michael the servant entered, and announced, "Sir William Midharst and Mr. Grey."

"You will see Mr. Grey first, of course, Maud?" said Mrs. Grant, in a low voice.

Miss Midharst looked perplexed, and by way of reply said:

"Why?"

"Oh, you will surely see your guardian before a man you met only yesterday?"

"Don't you think it would look strange, Mrs. Grant, if I did not see my cousin before Mr. Grey?"

"Certainly not. Mr. Grey was appointed to take care of you. He has known you since you were a child, and you owe him every respect," said Mrs. Grant, speaking so low that Michael could not hear. Her manner was very earnest.

"But Sir William is my kinsman, and, Mrs. Grant, you and I are his guests in this place. You really would not have the owner of this place wait while I, his guest, received even my guardian? No; my cousin must come first. Michael, ask Sir William to walk this way."

As soon as the door closed on the servant, the girl turned to Mrs. Grant, and said: "Will you see Mr. Grey and apologise for delaying him? Please do, Mrs. Grant."

As the new owner of Island Castle entered the room he met Mrs. Grant going out.

When greetings and ordinary formalities had been disposed of, and the cousins were alone, the man spoke.

"I had an interview with Mr. Grey yesterday evening, and I am glad to say that I found him most reasonable and agreeable. I had two things to speak to him about, neither of which was likely to please him, and he behaved admirably."

"I am sure the more you meet him the more you will like him," said Maud, looking up thankfully to her cousin's face. She felt herself under a personal obligation to her cousin for his frank approval of so old and valuable a friend of her father and herself. The desire to be governed, common to all women, had suddenly sprung up in her nature when her cousin spoke to her last evening of his claims upon the guardianship of his only cousin, and she was now greatly relieved to find respect to the wishes of her father's successor did not clash with fealty to her father's only friend, one on whom she looked as having a strong claim upon her regard and attention.

Sir William did not seem to hear her words. He was standing at the window looking down on the Weeslade with dreamy inattentive eyes.

She was seated on a low chair at the other side of the window. Her eyes were timidly fixed on his face. He had come from Egypt, the land of the inexplicable Pyramids and the inscrutable Sphynx. To her this cousin William's inner life was as dark a mystery as the riddle of the Pyramids, and his face as baffling as the face of the Sphynx. Until now she had heard men speak, and had attended to their words. When he spoke now she regarded less the words than the unuttered thoughts attending upon them. The "How d'ye do?" of other men required only a straightforward answer, without thought beyond the scope of the question. The "How d'ye do?" of her cousin came to her attended by veiled figures of strange aspect, that gave the simple question a volume and depth the mightiest questions never had before.

Was it because he who had been the ogre of her younger years had become the protector of her orphan maidenhood, and the air of the ogre still hung vaguely around him in her mind? Was it the influence of remote consanguinity operating, as blood does, between those of the same stock who have met for the first time when grown up? Was it the background afforded by the Nile and the sacred crocodile, and the mysterious barren silent rows of the Pyramids, with those features of men and women lying hid in folds of linen and layers of asphaltum, with, save the eyes, all the features, the lips that were kissed by lover or mother, still unchanged, still the same lip, the same dimple in the cheek, the same curve in the temple as when Thebes and Memphis conned the stars, the Paris and the London of three thousand years ago, and taught the world all the world knew?

Then before her mind rolled forth the plains of purposeless white sand, overhung by the plains of unbroken blue sky, and, blazing in the blue sky, the fierce sun. And here, against the homely sash of that old familiar window, that commonplace sash and frame, down which she had seen the dreary rain of weary winter days slide to the sodden ground, he leaned; on his face and hands the brown harvest of Egyptian suns, in his dark eyes the strange knowledge of awful arts and rites wrought in labyrinth and in cave by Egypt's ancient priests, and in his tones the softness of a land where no waves beat and no winds blow loudly enough to drown the timid whispers of a maid.

"Are you thinking of Egypt?" she asked in a low voice.

"No. I am thinking of Maud," he answered, without moving. Then, rousing from his reverie, he said: "Yes, Mr. Grey was most agreeable last night, and I am sure we shall get on very well together. One of the things I had to speak to him about was a matter of business detail. The other, Maud, was of the first moment, the arrangement you and I came to yesterday about my acting as your personal guardian."

"What did he say about that?" asked Maud aloud. She thought he had not been thinking of Egypt. His mind had not been far away, as she had supposed, but close at home, near where they were, busy with thoughts of her. Was it strange a man who had that dark sad face, and those deep eyes, and those mystic memories, and so short a knowledge of her, should, while looking so out of that old familiar window, think of her, who knew nothing of the world and was so commonplace? Was that strange? No doubt, in her, in this secluded place, and with her humdrum life, the objects entering into which were all around her clad in the threadbare interest of daily use, it was not strange that, being who he was, and coming as he did, she felt a great interest in him. But that he should concern himself so much about her was inexplicable. Egypt had been to her, since first she knew how to hold a book, the land of her dreams. Her only wish for travel sprang from a desire to see the site and monuments of the race which gave the arts and sciences to Europe. And here was her cousin William come back from that land, and, while lost in a reverie which looked proper to the country of the Nile, thinking of her, Maud.

The young man paused awhile before answering her question. Still his face wore the same

abstracted look as he replied:

"At first Mr. Grey seemed surprised and shocked. I think it appeared to him as if he had been slighted. I intended no slight to him, and I don't think my manner showed anything of the kind. At all events, all went well, and he seemed quite satisfied once the first surprise had passed. How did he hurt his knee, Maud?"

"I do not know. I am very sorry to hear he has hurt himself. When did it happen?"

"He said some time ago. It gave him dreadful pain last evening. I never shall forget the shout it wrung from him. It was like the shout I once heard of a man who awoke in the jaws of a crocodile."

"I never heard anything about it. I hope it is not serious, and that all he has been doing for us of late has not made it worse."

"I hope not. By-the-way, he is waiting to see you, Maud. Shall I tell him he may come up? I have told some tradesmen to be here about this time. When you have finished with Mr. Grey come into the courtyard. I shall be there. I am going to have vases for flowers put up, and I want to consult you about them."

He turned round and glanced down at her. The vacant look faded from his eyes, a deep gentleness stole into them, and from them spread like light over the rest of his features as he took her hand, and said, in tone of deep solicitude:

"Are you always so white, Maud? Are you sure you are well?"

"I am quite well," she answered.

"You must not fret, dear Maud. I will send Mr. Grey to you. You are more used to him than me. But you will get used to me some day very soon, won't you, child?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Grey and I will take great care of you. He shall act as my deputy while I am away, and when I come back I will take care of you. I will go now; I do not intend letting those tradespeople disturb anything for some time; I only want to show them what I mean to have done. For my sake, Maud, you will not brood? Promise me that."

"I promise."

"And you will show me where you would like the vases placed?"

"Yes."

He kissed her hand first and then her forehead, and left her.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TYRANNICAL PAST.

When Mrs. Grant went out of the drawing-room she sought and found Mr. Grey in the waiting-room off the grand entrance-hall. She closed the door, and going up to the banker in haste said:

"I want to have a few private words with you, Mr. Grey."

"I am completely at your service, Mrs. Grant," answered the banker, in his most amiable manner.

He looked worn and haggard to-day. The strain was telling on him. He now knew what sleepless nights were, and days haunted by the phantoms of memory, and slight rustling sounds of hideous import. He had learned to start suddenly and look hastily over his shoulder. It was not the dread of the hangman disordered his peace, but the faint rustle of a woman's dress, and the plunge into the darkness and the sense of suffocation under a burden, and the strange twanging of the arteries in his temples.

"You know," began Mrs. Grant in an excited manner, "that I love Miss Midharst, and would do anything I could for her."

Mrs. Grant had been very much shocked and excited by what had passed between Maud and her about Sir William, and the excitement still survived.

"I am quite confident of that," answered the banker, with a grave look. He saw Mrs. Grant had something serious to say.

"Will you promise me to keep what I say to yourself?" she asked quickly.

He paused awhile and looked down.

"My position is peculiar," he said. "Although I am not Miss Midharst's guardian in the usual signification of the word, I really feel bound by my promise to Sir Alexander to do all I can for

her, and that being so I could not undertake to keep to myself anything which it might be to her advantage to disclose."

He said this in his most deliberate manner, and with his eyes fixed solemnly on the face of the widow.

"I know I may trust you, Mr. Grey. My only reason for asking you not to speak is, that if you mentioned my name in the matter I should be in an awkward position."

"I promise you not to mention your name in connection with anything you may say to me."

"That will do. I want to speak about Sir William Midharst."

"The new baronet!" cried Mr. Grey, with a start and suddenly intensified interest.

"Yes. Do you know anything of him?"

"No. Nothing. He has not yet established his identity, but there can be no doubt he is the right man. As what you have to say concerns him, and as I am under no pledge to guard his interests (though of course I should not sit still and see them injured), you may speak quite freely. I promise to mention what you say to no one."

They were sitting by the table. As Mr. Grey spoke he drew his chair closer to his companion's, and, by his manner, showed he had sincerely resolved to respect her confidence, and attend most carefully to anything she might say.

"Have you any idea that Sir William is in want of money?"

Mr. Grey started. A more unexpected or disquieting question could hardly have been addressed to him. This was the first time Mrs. Grant had mentioned the word money to him, and now she uttered it in connection with this young man who had already to a great extent come between him and the heiress. He answered:

"I may tell you in strict confidence he has applied to me for a large sum of money, and of course I promised it. May I know your reason for asking?"

"I'll tell you my reason by-and-by. The money he asked you for is not to come out of Miss Midharst's fortune?"

Again Grey started. Then he knit his brows and braced himself together, and, fixing his eyes resolutely on the carpet, answered in a firm voice:

"No; I could not think of touching Miss Midharst's money for anyone but Miss Midharst herself."

He did his best to control himself, still at the words "but Miss Midharst herself" he shuddered. Had Mrs. Grant discovered anything about the Midharst Consols? She was the last person of his acquaintance he would imagine likely to come upon a clue to the fact. But no one could tell who might pick up the thread. If he had known matters would take turns like these he should never have touched those Consols. He would have shut the door first. What a fool, what a poor fool he had been not to have taken his mother's advice and shut the door.

"But if he wants money he must be poor?"

"He will have a fine income now."

"Miss Midharst has a large fortune, Mr. Grey."

"Very large."

"And you are the guardian of it."

"Yes." What on earth was she driving at?

"Well, I think it only right to tell you that if Sir William is now in want of money which is not Miss Midharst's fortune, he will very soon be in want of the money which *is*." She rose and fixed her excited eyes upon him.

He rose too, passed his hand absently across his brow, grew pale, and said in a voice of perplexity:

"I forget part of it. I forget part of it. But you know I was looking at the Witch's Tower of the Castle, the Tower of Silence, when the steamboat blew up."

"So I have heard," whispered Mrs. Grant in a tone of awe. The change in his face was terrible.

"And they never found the body of Bee. They never looked in the right place. It is on the top of the Tower of Silence, blown there when the boiler of the *Rodwell* burst. I saw the body blown up there through the smoke and steam."

"Mr. Grey! Mr. Grey! are you ill?" said Mrs. Grant, when she could find her voice.

Gradually the fixed look left his eyes. The hands, which had been feebly beating on the table, ceased to move, the sensation of tightness left his forehead, and pale and with a gentle sigh he sank on a chair.

"Are you ill, Mr. Grey?" asked Mrs. Grant, in a less alarmed tone now that she saw his mind was clear again.

He answered feebly:

"I have not been very well, and of late I suffer from sleeplessness, a very bad thing for a business man, because when he lies awake at night he is always thinking of his business, and that wears one greatly. Did I faint?"

"No."

"Pray do not ring. I am all right now. I do not want anything. I feel quite well again. It was only a passing weakness. You would greatly oblige me if you will not speak of what has occurred to Miss Midharst, or to any one else. Did I say anything?"

"Something I did not catch. You spoke of the sad death of Mrs. Grey in the *Rodwell*. You said, I think, that you saw the *Rodwell*, in which your wife was, blow up. Really, I was too much alarmed for yourself to think of what you said."

"Ah," sighed Grey in a tone of profound relief. "You were telling me something that interested me very much when I had the misfortune to interrupt you. Let me see. What was it?"

His face was gradually regaining its ordinary look; the haggard aspect of a while ago did not come back so strongly marked, still he looked worn.

"Perhaps you are not quite well enough to-day to be troubled with what may after all be only a wrong guess of mine. But I feel it strange, when I come to think of it, that Miss Midharst should accept a man Sir Alexander did not like as a guardian, when all knew Sir Alexander wished you to have all the power he would give to any one. I spoke to Miss Midharst, and she certainly means to take the advice of Sir William in matters regarding herself. Well, then, I thought, Sir Alexander has stripped the land and the town house and this place, and has rack-rented and injured the estates, and saved up the money, with your help, for his daughter. Then I wondered to myself if Sir William was in want of money; for if he is in want of money, what could be better for him than to make himself agreeable to Miss Midharst, insist upon her staying in this place, become her guardian and—marry her."

"Aha!" exclaimed Mr. Grey in a half cough, half groan. "But do you think there is a likelihood of such a thing occurring?"

"Do you, Mr. Grey, believe in love at first sight?"

"Yes; that is, I believe in something which may grow into love."

"Well, this may be a case of it."

"But have you any reason for thinking Miss Midharst has conceived a—a tender feeling towards her cousin in so short a time?"

"No, no. I don't say Miss Midharst is in love with her cousin, but she told me this morning he interests her, and that is a good beginning. You know she has never met a young man of her own rank closely. Beyond a bow and half-hour's chat once a month when she and I slipped into town, she has met no one but you and her father. She has a craze about Egypt, and this cousin is just home from Egypt—that's another thing in his favour. I don't want any one to marry Maud for her money only, and this is the reason I speak to you. She's too good and beautiful to be married for anything but her own amiable lovely self, and I hope you will prevent any fortune-hunter from snatching her up before the grave is closed over her father."

"I—I—I," stammered Mr. Grey, "I do not feel quite well. I fear I am growing dizzy again."

The door opened.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Grant. Good-day, Mr. Grey, I may not meet you again to-day. You are not looking very well. Miss Midharst will be delighted to see you. She told me to tell you so. Go to her. You will find her in her own little drawing-room; the Lancaster room I think they call it. I hope your knee is better. By the way, when and how did you hurt it?"

"I—I am a little tired."

"The leg?"

"Yes."

"How did you do it?"

"Strained it."

"Long ago?"

"The night my wife was lost." He shuddered and leaned upon the back of the chair.

"It is his head that troubles him and not his knee," whispered Mrs. Grant.

"Take my arm and come into the air. The air will do you good," said the young man in a voice of grave solicitude and kindness.

"Thank you," said Grey, accepting the offer.

The two left the room together, the banker upon the baronet's arm.

Neither the knee nor the head of Grey was suffering at that moment; but he felt a deadly faintness come over him when Mrs. Grant made the appeal to him to protect Miss Midharst against fortune-hunters.

"The blows come too quickly and too heavily; too quickly and too heavily; too quickly and too heavily for me."

The open air and soothing landscape calmed Grey. He always felt better out of doors now than between walls. Rooms had furniture, and furniture cast shadows, and no matter what part of a room you sat in you could not command a view of the whole. The atmosphere indoors was heavy, depressing, and often laden with scents a man's wife might use, had used once; and these perfumes, coming suddenly upon the sense of smell, brought memories of long ago and half-awakened expectation of seeing a certain woman of pleasing aspect the love-bearer of one. But with the dying breath of the perfume the loved familiar figure of the olden time faded away, and in its place came a ghastly face with open dead eyes and open dead lips, and temples dark with the blue veins of suffocation.

When that thing came in the house no one could avoid it. It seemed in all places at the same time, and if one raised eyes no matter to what, that thing met the eyes somewhere. Even when it had not followed the dying perfume of the musk, so long as one was in the house one might come upon it anywhere, leaning against the wall in the darkness between the double doors, huddled in the shadow of the great oak chimney-piece in the hall, lying across the mat on one's bedroom-door when one was retiring for the night.

Across the threshold of that bedroom-door this jaw-dropped thing never came. That room was one's only sanctuary. The old love of the long ago never left that place with the dying of the perfume. Here one's wife moved about the room and stood by the bedside as God had made her, comely, and as love had made her, happy; not as indifference had made her, wretched, and the devil's agent had made her, dead.

And yet to live in that sanctuary for happy memories was almost worse than wandering with a dim light through corridors against the walls of which stood shrouded indictments for the intolerable crime. It was hard to wake and smell the musk, and find one's young wife standing at the glass, with the golden-topped vial in her hand, and a smile upon her face, then to see her fade slowly away, to spring up, ask why she was taken from young and loving arms, and to be able to get no answer; until one opened the door, and found there one's own middle age, and that terrible thing across the threshold.

Yes; the open air was much better than the house. Out of doors one could keep at a distance from shadows, and, when there is the rustle of a dress, soon find out it is not hers. Then, when the worst comes to the worst, one, when out of doors, could run. Indoors, you cannot run any distance, and jumping through a window would attract attention and inquiry, neither of which could be endured now.

Leaning heavily on the arm of the young baronet, Grey walked up and down the terrace in front of the northern face of the Castle. In about a quarter of an hour he said:

"I am very much obliged to you, Sir William. You have been exceedingly kind to me. May I ask you to do one more little favour for me?"

"Certainly."

"Will you kindly make my excuses to Miss Midharst, and say that I will not intrude upon her to-day. I—I—I do not feel quite equal to it. I am unstrung a little. I shall drive home; and a drive always does me good."

His voice was unsteady and his manner restless.

The baronet saw the banker safely into the ferry-boat, and then returned to the Castle with the message.

Wat Grey got into his fly, thinking, "I'll go to see my mother."

END OF VOL. II.

CHARLES DICKENS AND EVANS, GREAT NEW STREET, FETTER LANE, E.C.

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